



Grand King Cassandra

by Ispod

Prelude:

Before we really begin the story proper, we think unveiling some history of the world our tale takes place in would be most beneficial, for the sake of awareness and having a foundation with everything going on. However, feel free to pass through if you wish to only understand it in the tidbits presented. Not to worry, no one here would judge you for wanting to keep things simple.

It all begins in a rather remote country known as Achos. It is not the largest country in this world, by far, but offers rich soil to the north, and great communities to the south. However, that's a telling for another day.

The Achosian people were quite content with everything they had. War had not torn through the nation in more than 5 centuries ago, and the country's persistent neutrality was admired by many other countries. Achos would have been considered an "angel child" of the family.

However, the government working over the whole country wouldn't prove quite so prosperous. Throughout many recent decades, many of the elected figures representing Achos would show rather questionable actions during their time in office, causing the millions of people in the population to start doubting in their government.

It started with odd economic policies being enforced, and then to rumored scandals with known shady sources, followed by provocative laws being passed restricting the rights of the people. In the most recent times, the politicians have proven so ineffective, selfish, and hungry for control, that the patience of the people was wearing thin. Talk of simple impeachment rose to imprisonment, with mentions of extensive torment once taken off of their pedestal.

Tension, frustration, and anger with the Achosian government was only continuously rising. Many radical protests would rise close to Stegrot, the country's capital city, provoking extra security measures enforced by the same officials angering the population.

Eventually, with poorer and poorer considerations being forcefully implemented into Achosian society, virtually the whole of the people decided that they've had enough of these foolish and corrupt processes, though even more so for the ones bringing them to the surface.

Legions of protesters and gangs formed together to unleash a widespread assault of Stegrot, with explosive destruction of the political property, chasing out any one of the politicians away and into hiding. Those who led the much-hated campaigns, however, were murdered as they stood.

Several security men were persuaded to take the other side, and effectively destroy the workings of the officials from the inside, even if it cost their own lives in the end. The violent activities spread throughout Stegrot, with destruction of many buildings and sites taking place, and with several formidable gangs claiming hold of the territory to prevent any return of corrupted, power-hungry individuals.

These events have led to Achos being within a state of anarchy, with twenty-five years worth of mindless destruction and violence widespread throughout the nation. From fear, no one has risen to the stand, willing to rebuild the government and Achos from the disaster. However, for some who were not so fearful, they only saw an opportunity to not only bring the good country of Achos back, but make it better than ever.

Our story is about one of these kinds of people, appropriately named Cassandra Streit.

Cassandra was born within the first few years of the anarchy taking over, and was raised by scholars whom were pressured into homeless life. They taught her as much as they could as they raised her, unaware of how much this would impact the young Cassandra in her future. Though, that's not just referring to her goals or character.

From her time of childhood, Cassandra had discovered a phenomenal quality about herself that no one would ever guess anyone could be capable of: the ability to naturally understand, and even control, the intensity of any conflict.

This power's origins and/or causes are unknown, although it was purely because of this incredible ability that each of Cassandra's

"parents" had found reason to thoroughly believe she could help Achos regain its composure and return to the prosperity it once had. By being taught about sociology, psychology, the nation's history, as well as some political savvyness, Cassandra Streit had risen to a young woman eager to do just what her family hoped she would do.

Now, along her journey, another had come to join Cassandra; a teenage girl named Emily Wasima. She had been physically and characteristically shaped by the wartorn environment and radical activities of the people around her. Emily's parents encouraged much of this behavior, but their role would be halted from a gang war claiming both of their lives. For several months, she was forced into a solitary style of living. That is, until she ran into Cassandra.

Simply with realizing that anarchal life wasn't all it was cracked up to be, Emily began to look up to Cassandra, and share many of her ideals. The two young women became the best of traveling companions, even when they would sometimes dare to disagree with each other.

With all this now known, this is where the tale must truly begin. This is the story of how the country of Achos, torn and beaten by anyone not of any political stance, and now recovering to the nation it had once been.

Chapter 1:

"A leader is best when people barely knows he exists; when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, 'we did it ourselves.'"

- Lao Tsu

Thursdays were always reserved in the schedule specifically for rummaging through abandoned storage sheds, whenever they could be found. Junkyards would always make decent substitutes, if you could ever disregard the gross smells. Today would be good for these activities anyway, as the sun had laid its ethereal, glowing arms firmly in the air.

Any sort of creature is anxious to seek shade, with the possible exceptions of birds and reptiles.

Cassandra and Emily had been given some time to adapt and adjust to the town they had traveled to. A sign in the road would point out the name of this place as Thomaston, mostly a residential and small business kind of town. There were entire blocks with organized lines of storage sheds, waiting to be ransacked for anything useful. Unfortunately, all of them were locked with no key to be found anywhere.

"I'll look around for back doors," said Emily.

"Don't bother, Em," Cassandra replied, "you're forgetting who you're with."

"The town looks so ordinary, it's rubbing off on me."

"I might need to up my game, then."

Cassandra reached into a knapsack she was carrying, and pulled out a thick, black journal. She flipped through the pages very methodically, as if looking through for one of the words in a dictionary. Much of what was written within were several archived incidents of uncertain origin, and mostly served as a set of reminders for Cassandra to refer to in case she ever forgot anything. She made the habit to carry it everywhere she goes, as she'd be lost without it.

Once stopping on a page she had been looking for, Cassandra traced an invisible underline beneath the words with her fingers and read through what she had been looking for. She looked upon the large metallic door with a determined grin stretched across her face. She set the journal back inside her knapsack, and planted both of her palms on the door. The surface was painfully hot, but it wasn't anything unmanageable.

Cassandra closed her eyes calmly, taking a few deep breaths in preparation. With a firm press and push, the large metal door had a large hole forced into it, as if a bulky monster had run straight through it. The crashing sound that followed echoed through the seemingly dead town, with no one to react to it. Cassandra looked back at Emily, still grinning. Emily made a sarcastic smile and rolled her eyes to counter her friend's smug attitude, as if to say "nice job, showoff."

Emily wasn't at all surprised to this sort of occurrence, as she's been made well-informed of Cassandra's incredible powers. Since she was a little girl, Cassandra had somehow been gifted with the ability to control the intensity of any conflict. At first hearing, it may simply sound like a simple manipulation of social circumstances, such as two people arguing with each other. However, Cassandra has learned that it goes much further than that.

In this instance, there was a presented conflict between the palms of her hands and the surface of the storage shed's large door. Knowing this conflict was present, Cassandra had brought the intensity of the conflict to favor the pressure that her hands gave, causing a hole to be forced into the door.

The inside of the storage building had organized stacks of boxes and crates, each of them filled to the brim with various odds and ends. The two girls enjoyed just the practice of seeing what sorts of items and objects they might run into, even if nothing they find is worth salvaging. Part of why they do it is to better understand a smaller piece of history present with the residents of Achos.

"Time to check in," Cassandra said.

As she walked in through the hole she made, an edge of the door had snuck into Cassandra's pants pocket. Now, after being affected by her powers, sometimes an object or person may give a rebound, depending on how much strength was needed to change the intensity of the previous conflict.

As the curled metal had managed to catch the pocket, a large audible tearing sound was made known, and caused Cassandra to pause her movement. Within moments, her jeans had been torn in half along its coronal plane, leaving the young woman's underwear completely exposed. Cassandra turned and looked down, hardly flinching in shock and more so rendered speechless. Emily had witnessed the whole thing, and had a huge smile trying to hold back laughter. She failed, and had collapsed on the floor in a fit of giggles.

Cassandra wasn't sure how to react, as it all happened so suddenly. After a minute to regain her focus, she shook her head in disbelief.

"Adding 'new clothes' to the list of needs," she stated, not even mumbling.

Emily needed more time to contain herself, laughing hard enough to force the tears out of her eyes. As soon as Cassandra managed to get out of sight behind the loads of boxes, she began to follow suit on the other side.

Chapter 2:

"He that is of the opinion money will do everything may well be suspected of doing everything for money."

- Benjamin Franklin

Usually, it takes hours to look through an entire storage shed, so the girls kept it in mind that there's no rush to look through every building immediately. Every once in a while, they'd lightly push against the box stacks to make sure nothing was off balance. Rummaging through the storage would also mean finding a way through to the back, so they could work themselves back to the exit once everything was checked.

Various corners of the building would give noticeable pitter-patters because of mice, and sometimes lizards. Being under a building that had no windows also kept the girls refreshed and free from the heat during the more brutal days of the season.

The only annoying part of hunting for useful supplies was the dust accumulation. Cassandra had little to protect her windpipe from it, and the feeling of it against cardboard never agreed with her fingertips. She searched through her third box, finding a stockpile of threads and fabrics. She gave a quick glance back to where her torn jeans had been, and had to chuckle to herself at the convenience.

Emily had been skimming through everything she came across, only concerned with what could help them stay alive. The southern regions of Achos were dry and flat, the cities and towns sparsely separated into their own pockets. Resources might have been exchanged still, but no other reasons aside from business have been considered for interrelations with other communities. It's likely for that line of thinking that Thomaston is virtually barren of residents.

While running through each of the clothing items, Cassandra had come across a long skirt, with a striking violet color. It appeared to be an appropriate size, even if the waist would be a little tight. She delighted in the contrast it had with her tan vest.

"Cassie," Emily had called, "come look at this."

"Er, can't it wait until we finish?" Cassandra asked.

"If there's anything else I think we should keep, there might not be room for it."

Cassandra had difficulty climbing and squeezing around the packaged inventory, though she at least got to a spot where she could see her friend's own space. A lot of dust had kicked up, causing her to sneeze. In Emily's hands was a fairly large porcelain statuette of an amateurly-crafted pig.

"Oh, it's a piggy bank!" said Cassandra.

"I don't think it's useful," Emily grumbled, "but I know you're kind of a sucker for cute stuff. Nice dress."

"Wait, wait. It might be useful yet."

The hollow pig was handed to Cassandra, where she gave it a light shake. There were light pings and clings heard inside, which made her smile like a child that might've owned it.

"This is what kids used to store money," she explained.

"Money?" said Emily. "What good are tiny coins in this kind of place?"

"If it was big enough like this one, you could put dollar bills in them, too."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Oh come on, Em, don't spoil findings like this. Money used to be so powerful back in the day, before either of us were born."

"I still don't get the appeal. Paper slips and tiny coins might have done a lot, but it doesn't really put food in your belly."

"It could do more than that! It gave you a home, food, and anything you could ever desire. Unfortunately, it also gave us war, crime, and greed."

Cassandra had snuck the piggy bank with her back to her own space. Emily resumed her looting with another dose of food for thought. Part of what makes Cassandra an interesting person for herself is just her ability to find awe with seemingly small and simple things. Sometimes it came off as kind of childish, but she also respected her for it. Real optimism is rare among people who have been taught to live by it.

"By the way," Emily spoke loudly, "what else I don't get is that you're not planning to implement any sort of currency in your rule."

"Perhaps," Cassandra replied as loudly, "but what *I don't get* is how *someone* can't get excited about how *good* our history was!"

"Oh, someone's been doing their homework on wise-assery."

"I always speak prepared!"

Cassandra greatly aspired to bring Achos back to its former prosperity. It was her dream, and she'd do as much as she could to fulfill it.

The plan for how Achos' economic status would rebuild itself under her leadership was to build it up from the basics, such like many societies have had to do in their own humble beginnings. That means no currency would form yet, and her policy for it would return to a form similar to bartering. In her own plan for it, rather than simply trading items and labeling them with assigned meanings, the system would involve services and being assigned work to do for the public, and being given the appropriate goods and needs for living by the government in return. Cassandra would hope this method also reduces the crime rate to a more manageable amount.

The two girls continued scrounging around inside the storage shed for about an hour and a half. Emily had to crawl back outside at one point, to reheat herself from a long while of comparatively chilly air. While Cassandra was about one-third of the way done, Emily was about three-fourths done inspecting her side. Searching through the higher boxes sometimes resulted in something getting smashed inside, although Emily thought nothing of it from being overexposed to such noises.

Cassandra pulled out an oddly heavy yet smaller box, peering inside to find bottles of lemonade kept just cold enough that each bottle was stuck to each other. She realized they may come in handy, in case water supplies would ever present itself as an issue for the both of them. She was tempted to pop one open right now, as it honestly looked quite quenching, but she'd already convinced herself to keep them until they were absolutely needed.

She was also somewhat glad she did hold back once she took a closer look at the box. Apparently, these were bottles of *hard* lemonade.

Emily had finished up her searching for today, and she was the one calling the shots for when they were to seek shelter. Waiting for Cassandra to finish up with various nothings would likely keep them waiting until dark. There's always another day to look through the sheds again, though Cassandra had difficulty realizing that when in her zone.

"Cassie, wrap things up in there," said Emily.

"Alright," Cassandra acknowledged, "just let me set some of these things back into their proper--"

"If you take longer than 10 minutes again, I'll see if I can do to that skirt what this door did to your jeans."

The threat did cause her to hurry, though Emily couldn't help but snicker at revisiting the sight of the jeans being destroyed. For what it's worth, they might as well have exploded off.

As Cassandra weaseled her way out of the boxes, she caught the smirk on Emily's face, and she made a look of humor back at her.

"How many of this piggy's coins to you want to bet that your laughing is just a cover?" Cassandra teased.

"Cover what?" said Emily, "I got nothing to hide."

"Just do me a favor," Cassandra said while assuming sultry poses, "if you see a big, mean bug on the rear of this skirt, and smack it dead for me."

"Shut up, you idiot."

"What, wouldn't you want to give it a shot?"

"You're, like, seven years older than me, and chances are you're also going to be my future boss. Odds are not in my favor."

Cassandra followed her friend's statement with drumming of her own posterior in a teasing manner. Emily gave a playful shove and they both laughed as they walked towards the road going further into Thomaston.

Their laughter was cut short once a faint sound of chatter could be heard.

Chapter 3:

"People are more violently opposed to fur than leather because it's safer to harass rich women than motorcycle gangs."

- Alexei Sayle

The air was carrying a noticeable sound to the girls' ears, and it sounded like someone having a conversation. No words could be made out, though the voices all sounded male. Cassandra's hand instinctively inched towards the inside of the knapsack she was carrying. Emily had a few beads of sweat trailing down her cheeks, though it was mostly caused by the heat of the sun. The girls both backed up behind the storage sheds, the group of voices gradually sounding more and more clear.

After a moment, the talking ceased. Emily made a skeptical face once the sound supposedly stopped. Cassandra, on the other hand, had made the judgement that the coast was clear, walking by herself to the middle of the road. She waved to her friend that all was okay, but Emily only made anxious beckoning gestures back to her position. The sound of a machine starting up broke the silence between the girls, and the noise was quickly getting closer to them. Cassandra darted to the other side of the road, behind a different building.

Approaching from a little ways away was a car.

Ever since countless gas stations were abandoned during the start of the anarchy movements, people had stopped using cars and trucks, leaving many unattended vehicles parked for nature to claim. Of course, that doesn't except some people from taking care of a few within the twenty-or-so years of lawlessness. After all, in a dry, flat terrain like south Achos, you can understand how much of a pain your own body is going to be to yourself when walking all the time.

That is, when you're not starving, dehydrated, or going under heat-stroke.

The men inside the car seemed to have their eyes on the block of storage buildings, likely anxious to do some rummaging themselves. Lucky for Cassandra, as there was nothing to hide her in the alleyway. Emily's first move was to head back inside the storage shed they already went through, but even Cassandra could tell how that was a bad move. The car made a turn to the left, and made its way to parking at the sidewalk.

The men all got out of the vehicle, one of them still hunched inside like he was trying to bring something out. Cassandra was able to keep out of sight, but barely. The only thing obstructing her from them was a single bush behind the fencing of what appeared to be a plaza.

"Looks like somebody did our idea first," one of them said.

"Maybe they forgot some good stuff in there," another one smiled.

"Hey Carlos, leave some o' the fireworks. We're startin' easy."

With that, the men went inside the shed, Emily trapped inside. Their stature didn't indicate any brute strength, but they're likely some squad of gangmembers from their garments and vehicle decor. Cassandra couldn't make out if they were armed, but she couldn't afford to take the chance. Having a moment to calm herself down, she maintained the will to go to action.

All it took was a couple of fingers in the corners of her mouth, and a deep breath. She let out a shrill whistle able to disrupt the atmosphere, and immediately the guys left the storage shed, now evidently cautious to the bone. Cassandra could make out some of their verbal reactions even from her position.

"I thought this place was deserted!"

"Somebody's watching us!"

"Dammit Ray, I told you to take lookout!"

Cassandra waited for Emily to make a break for it, but she had never seen her appear. She whispered hopeful words under her breath, waiting for the teen to figure out a way back to her.

The men moved away from the shed and back to their car, their watchful eyes scanning everywhere like anxious African meerkats. It was at that point that Emily could be seen running across the rear of the storage shed of their interest. Cassandra was rather curious how such a brightly-clothed girl could remain so elusive, but no doubt this kind of action was involved in Emily's way of living.

Making sure the coast was clear, Emily made a light run to Cassandra's location. She tripped on one of the old asphalt's cracks, but was able to recover without much damage aside from a few scratches. Cassandra ducked behind the bush as Emily made it to her.

"What were you thinking," huffed Cassandra, "hiding back in the shed?"

"What're you talking about?" Emily said, "I hid behind another storage building next to it. I'm not *that* shortsighted."

"Oh. I did not see that."

"There isn't enough room behind this shrub to hide us both, let's get out of--"

"Found you," a new voice interrupted.

The girls looked up past the bush to find all four of the men standing there in front of them. They all had unsettling smirks on their faces, as if they all had the same thoughts. While Cassandra forced a welcoming smile on her face, Emily kept stoic for all four of the guys. They both stood up, and while the teenage girl had prepared her fists to start flying, Cassandra opened her mouth to prepare speaking, though paused in slight surprise that she was actually some inches taller than these men.

"Hello," she began, "and what might you boys have on your agenda for us to meet like this?"

They all sequentially pulled out handguns of all different varieties,

and the one in front pointed the barrel of his firmly into Cassandra's left breast. Though she kept a kind and forgiving face, underneath her closed lips were clenched teeth of irritation.

"We don't like strangers," he stated rather softly. "Especially when they try to patronize us. You can keep talking, but we can find a way or two to cut it short."

"Now, now," Cassandra said, "is there nothing that can't be arranged?"

"Hmm. Maybe; just maybe. First, tell us what sorts of stuff is hiding in your bags."

"Certainly."

Cassandra made a light smack on Emily's shoulder, the gesture making her huff in contempt as she cooperated. Two of the guys searched through, and nothing in their knapsacks was anything of particular interest.

"Hold it," one of them said, "what's this?"

He pulled out the piggy bank from inside Cassandra's bag, grinning from the find. Both of the girls kind of rolled their eyes at the enthusiasm, though Cassandra was able to form a plan based on their attitude towards it.

"There's money inside," she assured them. "You might only hear the coins sliding inside, but there's no telling how many dollars might be in there."

They all kept their arms at bay at the proposition. They all appeared old enough to remember when money was valuable, so the offer was likely appealing to them. Emily made a puzzled face to all of them, which led to Cassandra lightly smacking her shoulder again.

"Yeah," the man in front said, "we'll just take this, and we'll leave you gals alone."

"We don't have much use for it," Emily murmured.

"All the more reason why you guys should have it," Cassandra reinforced.

Just before the girls could make it even ten feet, the sound of smashing and surprised "heys" had caused them to turn back around. The money-bearing piggy was destroyed, and only had a few coins to show for itself. The men brought out the handguns again, disappointed with their outcome.

"Now that I've had time to think," the leader said, "I don't think I particularly like the deal you've set us up with."

The girls silently looked at each other, with blank faces. After a moment, they both took the opportunity to make a break for it. The four men immediately give chase, the sounds and bullets of the firearms now littering the air. The girls knew to keep a fair distance from each other, so as not to risk both of them being an easy aim for any of them. The first place they run to is towards the storage sheds. The four men were starting to gain on them.

Both of the girls run around both sides of the men's car, hopeful that the gunshots might end up at least damaging something. The backside was loaded with dents, and one bullet even ricocheted back to hit one of them just under their good arm. One of them decided to stay back to aid them, and already the opposition was halfway outmaneuvered. The two girls split up once more through the storage buildings in an attempt to lose them. In spite of the separation, Cassandra made sure not to stray too far from Emily this time.

Emily had made a turn and put her back to the building, and even though she caught one of the men running past her, one on the other side was keeping watch of the aisles and managed to catch sight of her before he could run past. The chase continued, and Emily cursed under her breath.

She turned to the next aisle, but she was expecting the guy to follow her. She waited at the corner, and as the sight of shining leather arrived, she slugged the man directly in the face. He fell off of his balance, and was too dazed to even meet her figure with his vision. Before Emily could keep running, she had been pulled up off her feet.

All four of the men had reunited at a point in the aisles, one of them having an arm up to help the injured one.

"Find 'em?" one of them asked.

"Nah," another replied, "I stayed back to help Carlos here."

"Geez, looks like he's hurtin'."

"Lou, let's just forget 'em. Just two gals ain't worth anythin' to us."

"Gah, fine. The day's burning up without us, anyway."

The men put away their arms, walking away and back towards the storage shed that both of the girls had rummaged through.

Laid across the rooftop of one of the sheds was both of the girls, watching the whole thing from above. They both shared a moment to breathe out in relief, and shuffled off the roof once the guys were out of view.

"Well, that was fun," Cassandra said.

"Socking one of 'em felt good," Emily chuckled.

"Did you get hurt anywhere?"

"No, I'm fine. I think I felt a poke or two back there, though."

"Really? I thought they were terrible shots."

Emily snickered, and they both made their way in the opposite direction, heading deeper into the abandoned town.

Chapter 4:

"The thing is, and Americans are starting to realize this now, that while street gangs are violent, the Democrats and Republicans are worse. They are worse because their decisions affect your life."

- Jesse Ventura

After a few minutes of walking down the main street, the sound of explosions echoed through Thomaston. Evidently, a chase with two young women hadn't deterred the four men from doing their own ransacking through the storage sheds. Cassandra flinched rather hilariously at the loud noises, Emily not putting much of an effort in keeping the laughter to herself.

All the action and focus with the rummaging had prevented them both from really putting consideration for the rest of Thomaston's buildings. Right now, there was only the sights of destroyed, vandalized, and abandoned homes lining each side of the street. Instinct may dictate that residences like these may make for an appropriate place for shelter, as Cassandra was so inclined.

"Why don't we take a look at these houses?" she said, "it would probably be good for us to settle in somewhere here."

"What's wrong with being nomads?" Emily scoffed.

"Exposure, for one."

"I'm not so solid with the idea. Anyone or anything could be found inside them."

"Precisely the point, Em."

"I meant that in a *bad* way."

Despite the natural need for shelter, Cassandra could understand where Emily was coming from. Ever since losing her parents, she's always been adverse to taking up occupation of a place with four walls.

That being said, she couldn't keep denying Cassandra's suggestions for too much longer, especially for her own sake.

With shelter in mind, they made sure to keep moving away from the storage sheds. A base of operations close by a rummaging spot would certainly be convenient, but if it's an area of interest for other gangmembers, it might not be worth staying near it. Especially so for two girls that lacked any firepower to defend their own territory. Emily may have a fair deal of hand-to-hand prowess, but not everyone could have the same success of those 1-vs-100 battles inherent in action films.

Emily thought back to their fracas with the four men, mostly to formulate how to go about another encounter with them, when a realization hit her.

"Cassie," she murmured.

"What is it?" Cassandra replied.

"I just had the thought hit me: why did we have to run from those four guys when your powers could've made a quick conclusion for the whole thing?"

Cassandra turned her eyes away, hoping to find something to avoid the question. Unfortunately, nothing of real interest aside from other ruined houses came to notice.

"Well, I don't exactly think it was all necessary."

"What?" Emily asked, "what about the door on the storage shed? You're saying it's any different from that?"

"Yes."

"Why would you stop when we were in potential danger? That's the perfect time to use it against them!"

"Emily, I can't use these powers just for anything anymore, especially when we come across people. I might use my abilities for protection, but I don't want to be known as a leading figure with superpowers that beats up any opposition she gets."

"Okay, fine. No violence, I get it. How about trying to negotiate with them? You didn't make any effort whatsoever."

"People have the right to make their own decisions. How would I be any better than any past politicians by using people just as my will-less puppets? The only way things will play out properly is if I limit my use of my powers from now on."

Emily crossed her arms and arched her brows disapprovingly towards her friend. Cassandra sighed and hadn't really bothered to elaborate too much further, at least until later.

In the span of a half hour, the girls walked along the street and reached what seemed to be the occupational and business district. The sight of looted and ransacked shops and stores had carried a more depressing atmosphere, even if the residential property had much more visible destruction. Once the assault of anarchy settles into a community, the stores are likely the first to see the raw violence, whereas homes would likely keep safe until gang wars ensued. Cassandra shivered with the uncomfortable air lingering with almost every building.

At the next block, an establishment had caught Cassandra's eye. The building appeared to be a sizable, old-fashioned diner, complete with neon decoration around the roof and the foundation. Both of the girls nearly gasped at noticing that most of the building's windows were completely in one piece, uncracked. Above the front entrance was a logoless sign reading "Sheila's Cafe". Cassandra looked to Emily and nodded her head sideways, towards the two front doors in interest. Emily shrugged and decided to give it a look-see.

The interior looked mostly undisturbed, aside from fallen furniture, worn decor, and the whole thing covered in layers of dust. Otherwise, it was cool, roomy, and if they're lucky, there may be a food supply somewhere in back. Other wanderers might be discouraged by a cafe, with the impression that all of the food and drink was already looted out, though Cassandra remained hopeful. Emily was only surprised they hadn't disturbed any occupants upon entering.

"I'm surprised there aren't even any bugs buzzing around," said Emily.

"Go ahead, tell me I did good," Cassandra stated happily.

"Good Cassie, you'll get a treat later."

Emily decides to look behind the counters present inside, while Cassandra gives herself a rest in one of the booths along the front wall. The dust was bounced from the leather seat, and she coughed until she could get comfortable. A sneeze even followed after that.

She empties her knapsack, setting up the table with her inventory: a half-filled water bottle, the sixpack of hard lemonade, a couple of granola bars, and a few pens. The first thing she reached for was the black book, and began to flip through the pages until she found a vacant spot to write.

Everything written in the journal was an archive of various incidents that Cassandra had witnessed or been a part of. It was written to list out a particular conflict, the parties involved, how she shifted the conflict, and the result(s) that came about the change. There were

hundreds of recorded occurrences of various kinds, whether it be arguments between two people, or working against different natural forces, such like her method of making a hole in the door of the storage shed.

Emily hadn't found anything particularly useful behind the counters, except for a map and a few empty bottles. Though one thing caught her interest: a plug-in electric stereo. She pulled it up to the top of the counter, looking it over in curiosity.

"What does this thing cook?" she asked quietly.

"It doesn't," Cassandra replied, to Emily's surprise. "It's meant to pick up radio wave frequencies and turns it into audio broadcasts with live feed."

"So we can listen to other people?"

"If there was power or any active radio stations, we could."

Emily's lips scrunched up disappointedly as she played around with the useless knobs.

"Speaking of which," Cassandra stated, "I wonder if this place has a generator?"

She left her booth seat and went to the dual doors in the back, leading to the kitchen. Like the dining space, not a whole lot was noticeably wrong with the room, but then again, it was kept dark from the lack of windows. Cassandra tried feeling her way through any spot she couldn't see through, which only proved to knock over several utensils and cooking tools.

Emily entered through the entrance on the other side, immediately noticing a door along the wall to her right. She looked at the mess Cassandra made, and could only facepalm.

Emily put down a doorstep to allow more light to enter the dark kitchen, and she opened the door along the wall. Inside were various cleaning supplies, an indoor heater, and just as they hoped, a gas-powered backup generator. Next to the generator were two cartons to hold the gasoline, though one of them was empty.

Emily crossed her fingers as she went to pick up the second carton, and based on the weight, it was about half-full. She silently mouthed the word "sweet" in a victorious manner.

"We'll need to keep its use rather low," Emily said, "but we do have a generator to give us some power. Maybe at some point, a search for a gas station within town is in order."

Cassandra picked up some of the utensils she knocked over, and silently exited the kitchen while Emily figured out how to get the

generator working. She returned to her initial seat in the booth, and stared outside the window. She could already imagine how much better Thomaston appeared before the violence, and she found some charm with her vision. However, in Sheila's Cafe, the history was a little more difficult to picture. Even abandoned, it looked better than every other establishment around.

A whirring sound could be heard in the back.

"Try turning something on!" Emily's voice followed.

Behind Cassandra was a handful of light switches, and she picked one at random. With a single flick, the ceiling lights in the center of the room flickered on.

"Looks like we're good, Em!" Cassandra said.

The whirring quickly slowed back into silence, the lights going out with it. Emily walked out from the back and decided to join her friend in the booth. She slouched in her seat, already prepared for something like a nap. Both of them pulled out their water bottles, and quickly slammed them down, their mouths and throats refreshed.

Emily nodded in conclusive satisfaction, and Cassandra followed it with a content sigh.

Before either of them could get too comfortable, Cassandra turned to face Emily.

"Just out of curiosity," she said, "do you have any more water on you?"

"Lemme check," Emily mumbled.

She searched through her own knapsack, and her face gradually grew more concerned as her hands never brushed against that recognizable plastic. Her eyes peeked inside, and couldn't pick up any sight of clear, contained liquids.

"No water present, Cassie," she confirmed. "Do you have any water?"

"See, that's why I asked if you had any," Cassandra replied.

"Well, then. Looks like another search through town has to be done."

"Indeed."

Chapter 5:

"I don't like formal gardens. I like wild nature. It's just the wilderness instinct in me, I guess."

- Walt Disney

The girls decided to wait out the search for water until the next day. Emily had emptied her knapsack of what she gathered from the storage shed, and filled the space with some bottles found near the bar counter. Finding any pools of water might be pretty unlikely in this kind of terrain, but preparation never goes unrewarded.

Cassandra idly watched her friend get ready, and Emily returned her gaze with a rather puzzled look on her face.

"You're not coming?" she asked.

"Do you want me to come?" Cassandra replied.

"You don't have to; I'm just used to you being with me, I suppose."

"I was hoping to tidy this place up a bit. However, I'll tag along if you prefer me to."

"No, it's fine. I'll manage."

It wasn't long before Emily was ready to head out. Once she exited out the front doors, Cassandra stood looking from the bar counter. She squinted her eyes a little, feeling unsure about something. She brushed it off, and began sorting through the odds and ends left inside Sheila's.

There were more clouds in the sky than yesterday, to give relief from the warm sun's glow. Emily scanned the other food-type buildings spread throughout the district. She made an annoyed face as she jogged to the nearest one. She had little reason to feel enthused with scavenging through buildings that generally looked the same between each other.

The first place she stopped by appeared to formerly serve Hispanic-type food. Looking at the sign that listed all the options, Emily bit her lip as her stomach growled to spite her. She fought the sensation, and ransacked the place for water.

After finishing up, she managed to find and salvage enough to fill half of a bottle. Regardless of the shortcoming, she grinned to herself in pride. Nearby that restaurant was a gas station and convenience store, the latter being the only thing remotely close to being in good condition. Emily frowned at the sight, but continued forth inside the store.

Bearing witness to the interior was really quite an unpleasantry. All over the floor were discarded junk food items. Along with that were cheap toys, battery packs, as well as several postcards spread out all

over the place. It looked like a slight trek in itself to navigate through the mess and to the beverage shelves in back.

Fortunately, Emily was never one to care about the condition of goods wrapped in plastic bags, simply stepping on them whenever they happened to be under her foot. However, she thought to grab a few to last herself through the searching.

The once-refrigerated shelves were nearly completely emptied, with the lone exception of a single gallon of milk. Emily grabbed and shook it up, feeling a solid mass inside the jug. She expressed vivid disgust on her face, and put the "milk" back.

There wasn't much else to look for inside the store, so Emily came out 1-1 for her search so far. She muttered a curse to herself, blaming the maniacs who preceded her in rummaging through the place.

Already burning about an hour or two, Emily decided to take a break. She planted herself on a ledge near the sidewalk, pulling out a bag of chips. Too bad there wasn't any packaged burritos to be found in the convenience store; her mouth was watering at the thought of wolfing one down.

Before she could slide a chip into her mouth, she heard a shuffling across the ground. She sharply turned around, her eyes sternly scanning through any empty space between buildings.

"Hey," she raised her voice, "if you're looking for food, I'll give you some. It ain't much, but I can part with some of it."

No answer followed after her offer. In suspicion, Emily squinted her eyes while eating the one chip in her hand. After that, she tossed the bag behind her, almost all of its contents spilling across the pavement. She turned around to pull out a different bag, and waited patiently.

Just as she put another chip in her mouth, she heard a crunch behind her.

"Who is it?" Emily shouted.

Her sharp gaze had lowered to find a buck-naked, mussy, and dirty child.

She lowered her prepared fists in exchange for a completely bewildered face. The child kept swiping more chips on the ground, its own eyes unshaken in returning Emily's stare. It appeared as though the child was younger than her, as there was still baby fat present in its figure. Emily was completely lost in how to react.

"H-Hey," she greeted sheepishly, "where did you come from?"

The child did not answer.

"Are your parents close by?"

The child did not answer.

"Okay, what about any caretakers? Guardians, siblings? Pack members, maybe?"

The child did not answer.

Emily leaned closer forward to the unknown child, and it reacted with a wider gaze. It assumed a defensive position, planting its palms on the paved ground like forelegs. The chips didn't appear to be something of interest anymore. Emily took a sharp breath and raised her fists again. If a fight was to start, she would let it start with the child's first move.

The child started to circle around Emily, and its movements were so peculiar to watch. It kept low to the ground, its legs spread out like some sort of bug, and yet the kid was able to make it look totally natural. Emily was a little dumbfounded, but it wasn't enough to get her guard down.

The child leapt towards her with outstretched arms, acting so fast that a blink probably would've delayed her reaction. She ducked and pivoted sideways, letting the child completely fly over her. It stumbled on its landing, but recovered quite swiftly.

It immediately jumped at her again, and this time Emily was pushed off her balance. Once the child positioned itself over her, it began scratching and hitting her wherever it could. Emily put a firm strike to the child's gut, forcing it off. It took longer for the child to recover that time, but its fortitude won over.

At first, Emily was glad she was able to land a hit, though she immediately felt dismayed once she momentarily thought back on it.

Rather than leaping at her again, the kid made quick swipes and swings towards Emily, one of them scratching her across the face pretty good. She tried stepping back out of reach, though the child was eager to overwhelm her with wild, offensive moves. Under her panting, she was trying to figure out what to do. She was starting to lose the will to fight.

Once the child kept itself down low, Emily quickly decided to kick them along the ribcage. The child made an audible yelp with the pain, and Emily followed it up right away with fleeing. After a few blocks, she looked back and noticed that the feral child decided not to pursue her. She slowed to a stop on the sidewalk, and would've sighed in relief if she hadn't needed to catch her breath. She felt bruises all over herself, on her arms, waist, shoulder, and chest.

Emily sat down to relax behind a different building, rather than keeping out in the open. Hopefully the wild child wasn't eager to follow her trail and make a sneak attack. She not only thought for the better of herself, but genuinely couldn't find anything good to feel from fighting it.

She sighed to herself solemnly, hoping maybe talking to Cassandra about it would yield some good advice for her. Before that could be done, however, she still needed to look for more water.

Chapter 6:

"When rich people fight wars with one another, poor people are the ones to die."

- Jean-Paul Sartre

Cassandra had managed to dust most of the dining area, just leaving the booths on the right-hand side unaccounted for. Otherwise, all of the furniture was put back in their proper places, and some of the leftover liquor bottles were neatly organized under the bar counter. She was even able to fit in the hard lemonade bottles, though aesthetically speaking, they were a hideous match-up with the other brands.

Emily returned from their search, and Cassandra inaudibly gasped at the sight of the scratched and bruised teen.

"What have you been through?" she asked.

"Something unexpected, to say the least," Emily sighed.

"Now that I think about it, I thought I heard a dog digging around a few hours ago."

"It wasn't a dog. It was, uh..."

"Was it the four guys we had to deal with yesterday?"

"No, it was a kid. Just a kid."

Cassandra gave an appropriately confused look. It's true that anyone might be antsy in this unforgiving terrain, but she would have never guessed how bad it might have gotten to the children. Heck, she figured Emily might be one of those kids.

"The kid looked wild," Emily continued. "They had no clothes, messy hair, they were covered with dust and dirt, and they never spoke one coherent word."

She sat down in one of the booths, her short, white hair harboring clumps of dust and laid damp with body oil. She managed a light chuckle as she emptied her knapsack with one-and-a-half bottles filled with water. Cassandra gave her a smile in thanks for her hard work.

"Sorry," Emily said, "I drank some for making my way back. I never really thought how hard it is to walk within a few miles of a hot day, all without sweating."

"You can take it easy for a while," Cassandra assured, "you've been pushing yourself since yesterday, you deserve a break."

"You know, at some point, the thought hit me..."

"Oh?"

"This is a restaurant sort of place, right? Does the kitchen have a freezer room? There's bound to be some ice in there."

Cassandra couldn't think of a good response to follow the question with. So instead, she bowed her head in shame from the mention.

Emily took a moment to stare outside, the shade of a cloud rolling over the dry land. She picked at the scratches on her cheek, which had already scabbed over. She tried to think through the experience with the feral child, and why she felt so bad at the time.

She understood that the child couldn't be reasoned with, and that it attacked her first and everything, yet a foundation stood above from underneath everything: it was a child. Emily, a thirteen-year-old girl, had to beat up a child.

She cringed to herself, though she was able to shoot a look to Cassandra, still feeling rather stupid about the freezer comment. She began to ponder through questions.

"Cassie?" said Emily.

"Hm, what?" Cassandra muttered, brought back to reality.

"I know you sympathize with people who were forced to endure through the violence that spread throughout Achos, but I'm wondering: do you ever feel bad for the more-privileged people, too?"

Cassandra laid her knuckles into her cheek, having a moment to think. She sucked in her lip in concentration, as she was never really asked a question like this before.

"Up until now," she replied, "I haven't really thought about it."

"So what are you thinking?" Emily asked.

"I suppose I never really worried about them. They had resources, aid, and power; I don't see how being thrust into this anarchy is anything but a healthy reality check."

"You sound so sure."

"Well, what are you thinking?"

"I mean, I know that the rich and powerful were the ones who started this whole mess in the first place, but still, what about the ones that were never involved? Everything they had was taken away from them for something they didn't do. The violence overwhelmed their lives, the peace they had acquired and made for themselves."

Cassandra put her back to the booth seat, crossing her arms to think through the matter even more. Compared to when she and Emily are talking to each other in a more joking manner, she had never had the chance to think of proper responses for these more serious conversation topics. Emily waited patiently, scratching her hair and shaking some dirt loose.

"Well, Em," Cassandra resumed, "I think it's one thing to have made a peaceful life for yourself; you don't have to be rich for that. Whereas most of the people that had gained wealth and prosperity had usually done it at the expense of other people. That, along with political leaders enforcing economic policies that favor the rich, would you not act in ways to ensure that you stay rich? By whatever means necessary?"

Emily took a deep breath to do some thinking herself. True, most of the formerly wealthy figures of Achos had supported the corrupt politicians' methods, and everyone below them in class had suffered because of it, but she couldn't help but think about anyone who wasn't actually that corrupt themselves.

"I've been exposed to the numbers, Emily," Cassandra said, "believe me, this whole thing grew too big for any of them. I'm not saying they all deserved this, but you definitely can't deny that the majority had this coming."

"I can't really fight you on that," Emily murmured.

"Don't worry too much about it, alright? Once Achos gets back up on its feet, they'll have a second chance."

"Alright."

In spite of responding with calm acknowledgement, Emily's mind was still racing with questions. She only had the hope that Cassandra really knew what she was doing, and was also wondering what exactly her friend was thinking herself.

Cassandra got up from her seat, but paused a moment.

"By the way, if you're ever bored, the books on the shelf over there are more than just decoration. Not a whole lot of variety, but it's something to pass the time."

Emily became curious about it, so she sat up to look through her options. She grabbed one with a murky green cover, turning it over to

the front. The title read, *Fury in the Melon Vines*, and it looked rather thick. Put off by the size, Emily put it back and lost interest in the books for the rest of that day.

Chapter 7:

"How true Daddy's words were when he said, 'all children must look after their own upbringing. Parents can only give good advice or put them on the right paths, but the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands.'"

- Anne Frank

The girls decided to give the storage sheds another try, hopefully without anyone interrupting them with arms and aggression. One of the building's large doors was completely blasted off its lifting mechanism, and funny enough, it was next to the shed they've already rummaged through.

Emily had filled more bottles with water from the remaining ice inside the diner's freezer. If both of the girls drink from them conservatively, they should be hydrated for the next two weeks. Any time Cassandra took a sip, her lips puckered a little from a slight lingering taste of alcohol. She hadn't mentioned the hard lemonade to Emily, on the grounds that they are kept as either an emergency supply, or if there's a celebration warranted.

The door-less shed was already easier to navigate and search through, as the four men from a couple days ago likely looted everything they had wanted from it. Emily only hoped it was only stuff to satisfy their superficial tastes. Though if there's one thing that they failed to rid the interior of, it was mice. Cassandra kept almost-stepping on them, to which she'd have to search for new shoes if she ever hit one.

After blowing off a blanket of dust, Cassandra could make out a worn-out label on top of the box, reading "family". She opened it up, and the first thing she found was a photo album.

When Emily started taking notice of the small rodents housing in the stocks of cardboard, she immediately left everything as she had it and walked outside.

"Cassie, let's try a different shed," she shouted, "exposure to mice crap can end up eventually killing you."

Cassandra had acknowledged that she was being called out, though she couldn't put down the book out of curiosity. Bumping into larger boxes had disturbed the layers of dust, most of it flying into her face. As she got out, she took a moment to catch a bit of her breath. In the idleness, Emily noticed the album in Cassandra's arm.

"What's that?" she asked.

Cassandra responded with opening the album, revealing the white pages with transparent sheets folded over each photo. Behind the hard cover was a calligraphic writing revealing the people in these photos as the Benz-Hoffman family.

The first few photos on the front page showed an elderly couple, some children playing in a park playground, and some young men eating at some gathering, most likely a picnic. As Cassandra turned the page, there was a portrait photo with two parents and their daughter, seeming no older than 10. Emily had stared at the picture, taking in everything about it, but unsure how to feel or react to it.

"It's kind of funny," Cassandra said, "these are people that we don't know, but there's so much captured in these pictures, I can't help but feel nostalgic towards them. How about you?"

"A little," Emily mumbled.

"I can only guess how these people would act, or what they would say. Then the fact they all seem so close, I'm wondering how many stories they actually share, how many they bond with each other over."

Emily passed a glance up at Cassandra. Both of their minds seemed to be forming different inquiries about the people in the photos, and sharing the same mentality. However, Emily's thoughts began to go a different direction.

"Say, Cassie," she said, "come to think of it, I don't think I'm that familiar with your own family. You've never really brought them up before."

Cassandra broke her focus with the photo album, blowing into her lips while she thought of a good response.

"Well, I guess I never thought of that stuff as important or relevant," she bluntly stated.

"Hmm," Emily snorted, "that sounds rather unlike you. A lot of the time, you're all about caring for other people, and community, and whatnot. It surprises me you haven't really talked about them sooner."

"If you'd really like to know, I can tell you about them once we're done here."

"Why not now? We can multi-task."

"Tsh, alright, fine."

Cassandra pulled out her black journal as they approached a different storage shed, and began flipping through its several pages. They both knew how this would all work out. Once Cassandra forced a large hole into the building's door, she drew in a breath as they both started working through the boxes and crates.

"So, to start," she said, "I wasn't raised by my own parents. My mom passed away a few days after I was born, because of some illness. As far as I know about my father, he went away to join a gang. I don't really know much about him, but I honestly couldn't care less about it. Not to spite him, mind you, I just never bothered to learn more about him."

"So, who took care of you?" Emily asked, searching through a box.

"Four of these former university scholars. A history major, a sociologist, a law student, and a psychologist. They were all good friends with my mom."

Everyone was huddled in the end of an alleyway, to avoid the chill of the night. Many sounds of shouting and violent activity scattered through the town, and the air from prior hours of the day was dampened by an unusually high humidity. Everything was uncomfortable.

Nick was the only one with warmer clothing, while the other three were inconveniently in their business-casual outfits. It was all they had, but so far, they've been able to make it work.

However, between the four of them was a small baby, only wrapped up with newspapers and a mostly-dry dish towel. The four of them did everything to keep the little thing warm. They used to be a group of five, the fifth being the one who birthed the baby, though she had slipped into death's hands not long before today. All four of them stayed completely silent, with comforting the baby they had being the only exception. They kept this up for hours while simply waiting for the sun to return.

Malcolm was particularly stoic in their situation, and kept as a nightwatch. None of the other three could really tell the difference, as the guy was not too much of a conversationalist, anyway. The small child began making dry sobbing sounds, to which it was handed to Heidi for feeding time. She hummed to it softly as it drank its fill. Everyone was fortunate that Heidi was still young enough that she produced milk; it

ought to keep them from worrying about feeding the baby while they searched for food they could eat.

"What I wouldn't give for a fire," Bryce murmured.

"Oh yeah," Nick followed up, "one of those things we don't really have anything for."

"I know that, I'm just thinking out loud. Can I have that luxury, at least?"

"Sure, but chit-chat doesn't land us in a better spot."

"Why don't one of you look for more newspaper?" Heidi commented. "There might even be some lumber laying around somewhere."

"Anyone have a lighter?" Malcolm said sternly.

The three of them went silent.

A few people could be seen with a large bag sprinting down the sidewalk on the other side of the street, with a middle-aged man trying to chase them and loudly advertise their theft. They got away, with the older man stopping as his body turned against him.

The four students watched the whole thing in silence, feeling a little guilty for having their own problems to deal with.

"Nick," Heidi mumbled, "since you're the one who has the most energy of all of us, how about you head out and look for something we can at least cover up in?"

"Why me?" Nick said, "Bryce knows this town better than I do, he should go. If I went, I wouldn't come back until the sun was already up."

"Didn't you say once, 'my job isn't to say there's a problem, it's to fix them'?" Bryce mentioned argumentatively.

"That's when I was still a professor's assistant."

Bryce made a little shove to the thick-skinned man, with a face that says "quit being a baby". Nick sighed and complied with the peer pressure.

"The coast is clear," Malcolm said to him before he could check for himself.

Heidi looked down at the baby, keeping an eye on how much it's drinking. After a few minutes, the child stopped its suckling, and just tried to roll itself against the woman for comfort. She smiled as she watched it wiggle its limbs around trying to figure out how to use them. She put a finger to the baby's palm, and it reflexively latched its tiny fingers around it.

"By the way," Heidi said softly, "what did Savannah say she wanted her daughter's name to be? I don't remember what she said."

"Let me think," said Bryce. "I want to say it started with a T or K. Theresa, Kasey... Kiki?"

"Cassandra," Malcolm interrupted.

Heidi nodded while Bryce grinned. They both thought it was a perfect match, though their faces went sullen from being reminded of the mother. Savannah barely had the chance to watch her own child grow.

However, the four of them had all shared the same motivation to care for the child. They might not be trained caretakers, but they had their hearts set on helping raise her to become great. It's the least they could do in their good friend's absence.

Cassandra made a contented chuckle.

"They used to tell me that story all the time," she said. "When Uncle Nick came back that night, he said how he had a run-in with crows perched on a rug he nabbed for them. I remember thinking that part was so funny, and they'd laugh with me."

"Yep," Emily muttered, "sounds like you had a fondness for your childhood."

"It wasn't all milk and honey, though. We still had to work through the same hardships we have right now. Finding food, water, shelter, and staying together through everything that came at us, it played as much a part of our lives as it does now."

Cassandra had set aside the Benz-Hoffman photo album in the previous storage shed, not wanting to ruin the warm, welcoming mojo it has.

The girls had worked at least halfway through the current shed as Cassandra talked. Emily had found a collection of disks, which she had to be told what they were and what they did. Fortunate that they stumbled into a stereo back in the diner.

Emily lowered her brows in having a sudden thought.

"You know," she said, "not that it's no fun to hear about the good memories you built with your, erm, 'family'..."

"Yeah?" Cassandra spoke up.

"But now I'm curious, what did they do once they discovered you had powers?"

Chapter 8:

"I was not a messiah, but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances."

- Nelson Mandela

Cassandra was caught off guard from Emily's inquiry yet again; only this time, she was looking through a box of glassware, and losing her focus caused her to drop one. It shattered rather dramatically at the toes of her shoes, and part of her couldn't help but find some humor in that. Nevertheless, she had to back her mind up unto her friend.

"Well," she dragged out, "looking at it in a certain way, I suppose that's when my want to help Achos' recovery all started. Still, I can't deny it was rather surprising for them. I remember feeling strange about it, as it felt so normal to me."

"Could you do some of the same tricks you pull now?" Emily asked.

"Oh, of course not. Like any part of yourself, you have to exercise it to make it stronger. I barely had any idea what I was doing, and I'm certain the experience for everyone was quite interesting."

"You sound a little shaky yourself. You doing alright?"

"Oh, yeah. Maybe the thoughts of anxiously raising a superpowered child is rubbing off on me. *Phew.*"

"Look through some more boxes. That might tame your empathy."

Cassandra decided to comply, and zipped her lips. Passing another glance to the box of glassware, she gathered the broken glass shards with her shoe and brushed it all into a corner. Even with the owner absent, she still felt slightly guilty of breaking it.

"Did they ever scold you?" Emily asked with a mischievous grin.

"That didn't come until later," Cassandra chuckled.

"What did you do that tipped them off?"

"I, erm, well..."

"Go on, Cassie, give it to me loud and clear."

"I kind of, um..."

"What do you mean it was Cassandra who did it!?" Bryce shouted.

"I'm telling you, I saw the whole thing as I just said," Heidi said, losing her breath.

"Wait, wait, wait. Let's start from the beginning, I need to be sure I'm not just hearing things. Now, go through everything again."

"Me and Cassandra were walking around to search for food. She wanted to play on top of the railroad bridge, but I told her she couldn't, it was too dangerous. She didn't want to listen, and she got angry. She started stomping her feet, a-and--"

Heidi was in the middle of a panic attack, and tried everything she could to catch her breath from a hypothetical mile away. Behind the two former scholars was the remains of a large railroad bridge, completely blocking the tunnel for the road underneath it. At least, it used to be a tunnel before it all fell. Standing in front of the wreckage was a seven-year-old girl, staring at the destroyed structure.

Bryce had allowed Heidi a few minutes to try and calm down, and he approached the child. He put a hand firmly on her shoulder, which made her jump. She turned her round face to him, soaked with tears and a runny nose.

"Cassandra," Bryce asked softly, "I need to understand just what happened here. You think you can tell me what happened? Can you do that for me?"

"I-I'll try," the girl whimpered. "I w-wanted to look down into the tunnel from the- *sniffle* -the bridge. Aunt Heidi said no, and I got m-mad at her."

"What happened then?"

"I was stamping my feet really- *sniffle* -really hard, and then the w-whole thing w-went do-down!"

The girl spoke a rapid mantra of *I'm sorry's*, but the first thing that Bryce could feel about the entire thing was confusion. Unfortunately, his voice and speech sounds harsher than it really is. He put his arms around Cassandra to comfort her, taking a closer look at the two sides of the bridge. There was little to no evidence of an explosion, or even a heavy amount of rust. The young man scanned the scene as best as he could, yet there was nothing indicating a cause for the collapse.

A small crowd of people that took refuge in town had gathered around the site, murmuring to each other about the incident. The four scholars never bothered to listen in on what any of them were saying, only concerned for Cassandra's safety. While shaken up, the young girl was completely unharmed, to their relief.

Bryce asserted himself by carrying Cassandra, and gesturing that the others should head back to their own spot back in town. Heidi was able to calm down, while Malcolm and Nick were also focused on the

bridge itself. The sky was turning into a fading orange color, which made for more reason to return.

Within an hour of returning to their camping spot, the young Cassandra had fallen asleep. The four adults had kept in silence as they huddled under their thick rug blankets. The incident had concluded, but all of them still needed time to absorb it. The night was eerily silent, more so than any of them could recall.

"If nobody wants to talk about their experience with this, I'll start," Nick mumbled, careful not to wake the kid.

"So, Malcolm and I were evaluating everything back there. As far as we could tell, the bridge was not very old, and it was structurally sound enough to hold the weight of a crossing train. The way the bridge had collapsed, it appeared as though something enormous had crashed into it. Something larger and heavier than a train."

Heidi and Bryce shared a puzzled look towards Nick, yet they both had a distinct kind of confusion. Heidi's was timid, while Bryce was just still trying to piece the information together.

"Cassandra clearly said she was stomping her feet," Nick continued, "and immediately following, the bridge had fallen. What does that tell you?"

Heidi turned around, not eager for discussion.

"What, you believe little Cassandra was able to crash that bridge?" Bryce scoffed. "The girl barely has enough strength to push over a garbage can."

"I can't really buy it as a coincidence," Nick sighed. "I admit, I'm not a math genius, but I really don't see the probabilities of any flaws in the bridge to be plausible."

Bryce didn't like to admit it, but he couldn't refute Nick's statement. Having a close look at the wreckage himself, he completely understands their point.

"Alright," he grumbled, "say that it really was Cassandra; how could she figure out something like taking down a bridge without leaving any evidence of how she did it?"

"Your guess is as good as anyone's," Malcolm piped up.

"So, what's the conclusion, then? This seven-year-old girl somehow has superhuman strength when she throws a tantrum?"

"I know it does sound ridiculous," Nick said, "but what other possibility might there be? Maybe there really is something we don't know about her."

"Hmm. Well, I think enough has been going on for all of us. If there's something we should know about Cassandra, we can ask her in the morning. I, for one, am exhausted, and eager to get some sleep."

"I'm behind that notion," Heidi stated.

Nick had nodded, and within a few minutes, he realized just how tired he was as well. Without any thought, he dozed off after the two. Malcolm continued watching over them through the night, as he usually did.

A flock of small birds had perked up from their roosts, and began chirping to each other as the cool morning had arrived. The town had served as a temporary resting place for them, as nothing else within the property could be all that useful for them. Very few trees, no puddles of water, and all the bugs knew where to hide. One could almost empathize with them.

Each group member had woken up, one by one. Malcolm had scavanged a few food and snack items for everybody's breakfast, saving the smallest for himself. The young Cassandra was given an apple, which she was slower to eat than most other times. The four adults sitting around her exchanged silent looks, as if confirming they all had the same thoughts.

"Ahem," Bryce grunted, "Cassandra? Can we speak with you about something?"

"What, Uncle Bryce?" the girl replied.

Bryce still made a returning glance towards Heidi, in which she just nodded patiently.

"You remember the bridge yesterday?" he continued.

"Yeah," Cassandra whimpered a little.

"Don't worry, you're not in trouble. I just want to ask, are you sure it was you that made the bridge fall down?"

"Yes."

"You're *absolutely sure*?"

"Yeah. I didn't know I could, but I did."

"Can you tell us how you did it? Do you remember?"

The girl had taken a bite out of her apple and set it down on her lap. She put her hand to her head like she was trying to think.

"When I was mad at Aunt Heidi," she said, "I wondered if, um, if the bridge was lower, then maybe I could play on it."

"Then the bridge fell down under you?"

"Mm-hmm."

Bryce had turned and looked towards Nick, who just raised his brows in an unjoking "I-told-you-so" sort of expression. He gave a contemplating sigh, and patted the young girl's head. She resumed in eating her apple without much of a second thought.

"Just know, Cassandra," Heidi said, "no matter what you've done, we don't think any less of you. We still love you, and we'll be there for you."

"I know," the child murmured.

A little while later, the four of them had come across a piece of chalk for the girl to play with as they conversed with each other. None of them really knew what to think of it all, as it wasn't something that was ever even thought possible.

"So," Nick said, "what I'm mostly wondering is just where she got this power."

"Don't forget your cape, Captain Obvious," Bryce scoffed.

"Well, what's on your mind? There was never any indication or hint to her having superpowers, but how about you enlighten us, oh Genius of the Cosmos?"

"Your ego is pretty full despite the light breakfast."

"Hey, you two," Heidi interrupted, "none of us need this kind of talk right now. Settle down, both of you are allowed to share your thoughts. Let's all stay civil, alright?"

Both of the young men could swear that the woman's voice could quell a hurricane.

"Well," Nick said, "it might sound pretty ridiculous, especially coming from me, but you know how some kinds of monks are able to channel different abilities through training and meditation? Maybe Cassandra might be like them, only she could figure it out much, much sooner."

Bryce shook his head in disbelief.

"I know it sounds ludicrous," Nick continued, "but well, that's the best I've got."

"I think anything would sound crazy in this regard," said Malcolm.

"What are you thinking about all this, Mac? You've been pretty quiet about everything."

The dark man put his hand to his mouth, formulating a proper response.

"I'll be honest," he muttered, "I'm a man who's lived most of his life under faith. I believe that what we have here, in our dear Cassandra, is a miracle from God. Perhaps she was born as a way to redeem Achos from its madness."

Nick had put his arms up and laid back against a wall, momentarily turning away from Malcolm as he spoke.

"I don't have all the answers," said Malcolm, "and all I really have for a foundation is Achosian history. Regardless, that's where I lie on the matter."

"As far as what I'm thinking," Bryce shared, "human beings have been around on the planet for a long time now, thousands of years. We've had to adapt a lot during that time, and it's only made us stronger and stronger. Who's to say Cassandra isn't the next step for humanity to rise up to?"

"So, evolution?" Nick inquired.

"Yeah, I like to think so."

"You're forgetting the part where it takes millions of years to evolve."

"Oh, I'm sorry, but I'm not an anthropologist, I studied in law. Excuse me for the error."

"Now now, you two," Heidi said, "Cassandra is just on the other side of this wall."

The two men were silenced again with a verbal whiplash.

"Well, what say you?" Nick asked her.

"I quite honestly don't care," Heidi stated bluntly. "The only important thing is that it's still the same Cassandra we've been raising. There's nothing different. She has a superpower, none of us know where it came from, and that's it."

The three men couldn't help but nod in agreement. Malcolm watched Cassandra from the edge of the alleyway, quietly delighted in watching her decorate the sidewalk with her yellow chalk. A small lizard scurried past and startled her, but it was followed with a giggle.

"She's quite the wild tyke," Bryce mentioned, "but she'd make her mom proud."

"I remember having dreams where they both met," Heidi added. "She would be teaching her words and numbers, and we'd be there to tell her about anything she wanted to know."

"Aren't we doing that now?" Nick asked.

"Yeah, but..."

"It turned out to be too good to be true," Malcolm mumbled.

"It's already been seven years since Cassandra's birth," Bryce said, "and seven years since she had gone. It all still hurts sometimes."

"I think it helps that she's already so much like her mom," Heidi sniffled. "She has such peculiar ideas, but there's so much passion to fuel them. Savannah was the same way."

"Aunt Heidi," Cassandra interrupted, "come look what I drewed."

"What you *drew*, Cassie," said Heidi.

"Yeah, what I drew."

As they turned the corner from the alley, the other three group members had stayed silent between each other. In the quiet, they overheard the woman and child's conversation:

"Do you know what I wanna be when I grow up?"

"No, what do you want to be?"

"Um... what's our leader called?"

"You want to be a leader? Like, for Achos?"

"Yeah!"

"That's *awesome*."

"Geez," Emily said, "here you've been punching big holes into shed doors when you can take down a freaking *bridge*? Where did that wild side of you get off to?"

"I don't want to find out," Cassandra joked. "I shudder when thinking how little control I had back then."

"I figured mastery of a skill would mean a lot of fond memories."

"I was far from a master back then. I haven't even really gained that much control until around the time I bumped into you."

Emily furrowed her brows, puzzled at the statement. She never noticed Cassandra losing control of her powers before she met her. From the way she keeps track of herself in the black journal, it seemed like nearly the opposite.

She shrugged off the suspicion, then returned to rummaging and finishing through her side of the storage. However, she thought to have the last word in the conversation:

"You're welcome."

Cassandra laughed sarcastically, though it was all in good fun.

Chapter 9:

"The right man, in the right place, at the right time, can steal millions."

- Gregory Nunn

The freezer room in Sheila's Cafe had blessed the girls with a few stockpiled food items that had been left behind. It was a particularly hot day today, so everything fit together quite pleasantly.

Emily was seated in a booth by her own, looking through one of the books found from the shelves. She was quickly dozing off as her eyes ached from the rapid reading movements. She snapped back awake, ditching the idea as soon as she caught herself. Cassandra had joined the teen, holding two forks and a jar of preserved peaches.

"I know it's kind of late in the day," Cassandra stated, "but this is the closest thing we have for a decent breakfast."

The girls had sliced part of a slice for the both of them. Neither of them have ever had peaches before, so if it was remarkably good or bad, they'd have the pleasantries to react at the same time.

Emily blushed in a sudden rush of a pleasant sensation, and Cassandra would've chuckled at her if it weren't for the sweetness of the fruit slice interfering. She made a light swooning sound as she chewed.

"We're not letting these beautiful creations of nature go to waste," Emily affirmed.

"Thank the heavens for the farmers!" Cassandra cheered.

The two girls had both eaten and savored two slices from the jar each. They were both hunched over onto the table, a little sullen with having to restrict themselves from the rest. Emily had nearly fallen back to sleep, but she caught herself again.

"Is there anything we need to get done?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Cassandra sighed. "I thought you were the one to keep track of that sort of thing. My memory isn't all that reliable."

Emily had pulled up her rummaging knapsack on a whim, hoping to find something that could act as a conversation piece.

Her eyes had opened wider in interest as she peeked inside. She reached inside to pull out the various CDs she had come across during their last rummaging.

"Oh, check it out, Cassie," she said.

"Hm, those are the disks you found, right?" Cassandra mumbled.

"You said you could put them in a stereo, right?"

"That is correct."

"I will be right back, then."

The girl had eagerly dove behind the bar counter for the stereo. Before she could really set it all up, she ran to the back and into the storage room to run the gas generator. Cassandra took delight in watching her friend be more energetic for a change.

From behind the kitchen doors, the whirring sounds of the machine had disrupted the usual silence in the building. Emily returned to the stereo, looking for an outlet to plug it into. Cassandra grabbed the CDs and approached the lined up seats, curious about the gadget's various knobs and buttons. As Emily plugged in the cord, a loud static sound had burst forth from the speakers.

Cassandra quickly twisted the volume knob, gritting her teeth as the inside of her ears had been assaulted. Emily leaned forward against the countertop, confused with the peculiar object. She twisted a different knob that changed the frequency, still trying to grasp how to work the thing.

The little arrow that pointed to the stations raced back and forth, though all of the output was simply static. Cassandra had come to expect that beforehand.

"Which disk should we put in first?" she asked, looking through their options.

"It doesn't really matter," Emily mumbled. "What place does this little arrow have to be on to listen to it?"

"That's only for indicating different radio wave frequencies; it will just play these disks no matter where it is."

As Emily was adjusting it more finely, a brief pause in the static could be made out. She tried to find the gap in the audio, but was unsure what station it was on. Cassandra glanced at her fidgeting, and chuckled a little as it was an oddly-fitting sight.

The static had started to disappear between stations 84 and 87, and once Cassandra caught it, her face became more stern as she eyed the machine. A faint voice could be heard, and both of the girls had flinched from its sudden presence.

"... Hey... at this... station, dude..."

"Who is that?" Emily said. "Can they hear us, can we talk to them?"

"I don't think so," Cassandra muttered. "Just keep listening."

The voice started to become clearer once Emily's fingers had familiarized themselves with working the knob. Wherever they were, someone on the other end was just discovered.

"Look at this," a male voice spoke, "I got this old radio station working."

"Oh, bullshit," another male voice responded.

"No, seriously! Look, it says we're on the air, man."

"Is that so? Then shut it all off. Do you wanna advertise us to the other gangs out there?"

"What're you talking about? Nobody has radios out here, who would happen to be listening to us? Have a little fun, why don'tcha."

"It's hard enough to have to care for everyone under our wing in Norris Rock. We don't need anyone knowing about us, or our arms."

The two girls looked at each other in astonishment, and continued listening.

"It's all good here, big man. At least let *me* have my fun here, just for a while."

"If someone ends up hearing you, it'll be made very clear which one of us doesn't care enough to be worthy of staying with the rest of us."

"Relax, relax."

The voice began making obnoxious impressions and mock speeches, so the girls took it as a moment to quietly reflect on the circumstances. Sooner than what might be expected, the young man's playful antics had gone.

"A light's on," he whispered, "what's this...?"

The other end went silent for just a moment, leaving the girls wondering what's going on.

"Oh, *fu--!*"

The clarity of the audio had immediately diminished back into nothing but static. Cassandra reached and unplugged the stereo, and motioned Emily to go and turn off the generator. As the girl jogged to and from behind the doors, Cassandra put her hand across her lips in deep thought. The silence between them felt unnecessarily extensive. Before too long, Cassandra had allowed herself to grin with confidence.

"Emily, my friend," she said, "I think a long, long walk is in store for us."

Chapter 10:

"It is we the workers who built these palaces and cities here in Spain and in America and everywhere. We, the workers, can build others to their place. And better ones! We are not the least afraid of ruins."

The day had passed with preparing for a long journey the girls had planned. Receiving the broadcast from the stereo had brought inspiration and motivation to Cassandra, to which Emily had little time to ask questions while packing everything they needed. The teen girl was stuck with bewilderment while her friend only proceeded with eagerness and confidence.

Despite all the hustling, eventually Cassandra allowed a break for them both.

"So Cassie," Emily sighed, "care to fill me in on why we're packing everything we can find, even though we pretty much just settled down here?"

"I'm sorry, Emily," Cassandra said, "I suppose I should know better than to keep you in the dark about these things. I just got carried away."

"Yeah, yeah, apology accepted and all that junk, what're we doing?"

Cassandra had pulled out the map that Emily had found when they arrived at the diner. She splayed it across the bar counter, two of its edges too long for it to fit neatly on the surface.

"This town is named Thomaston, right?" Cassandra asked.

"Yeah?" Emily grumbled.

"You remember how we heard the man on the radio mention that the place they're located is named Norris Rock?"

"Oh, yeah."

"I had a look through the map, and it turns out that Norris Rock is only about seven or eight miles to the east of Thomaston. The two towns are in pretty much the same county!"

"So we're planning on going there?"

"Absolutely right."

Emily scrunched her face in doubt.

"You sound really sure about this whole thing," she said, "but I'm anxious to play devil's advocate. Don't you remember the guy on the broadcast also mentioning they had arms?"

"But Emily," Cassandra said smugly, "that's pretty much the entire reason we're going. If we could persuade to take sides with our cause, imagine how much closer we would be to reaching our goal!"

"Cassandra, if they're anything like the guys that came into town almost a week ago, I don't know how much longer we might actually last."

"I can see your point, but you keep forgetting that it's *me* they're dealing with. No matter how much firepower they have, I can counter it. I don't understand why there's room for doubt."

Emily crossed her arms and sighed, as her friend's idealistic nature was exhausting at times. She took a seat on one of the stools lined up in front of the counter, shuffling and reorganizing her thoughts.

"Look, I don't trust any gang," she said. "I don't want it to seem so easy for just anyone to come to our side of the fence just to stab us in the back. That's exactly how I lost my parents, I don't need it happening to you."

"I think that's what I should be saying," Cassandra said, smiling apologetically.

"You know I can take care of myself. If I had to be alone again, I could do it."

"I know you're capable of living alone, but how much better would you feel knowing that could be different, and more meaningful for yourself?"

Emily groaned internally, as this was never an uncommon sort of conversation with Cassandra. She didn't like feeling as if she was being talked down to, but she knew Cassandra was right.

"Tsk, fine," Emily sighed. "I'll still go, but I'm not eager to accept just anyone we meet; you'll have to do all the talking."

"That's what I do best," Cassandra cooed.

"How long will it take to get there?"

"If it's seven or eight miles, walking speed would probably have us clock it at roughly an hour and a half, maybe two hours."

"Well, I haven't built up these calf muscles for nothing."

The two girls continued packing up anything they needed. With Emily having a frame of reference for the amount of time they'd be there, she unloaded all the unnecessary things to weigh her down. Cassandra didn't need to pack much aside from food and drink. She helped herself to carrying more empty liquor bottles in case more water could be found on the way.

They worked well into the sunset, and they both went to sleep immediately after that. The cool air would provide relief in case the day tomorrow was as hot as it usually was.

The two girls awoke around the time that the morning sky began to gradually turn into a brighter and brighter blue. As they departed the

diner to begin their journey, various flatland critters had been disturbed, making for some entertainment as they trekked along. Among them were lizards zipping under rocks, prairie dogs ducking into their tunnels, a line of quails scurrying to the other side of the road, and a coyote that had been feeding from the carcass of a wild pig.

Emily was already anticipating sweat once the sun peered up over the eastern horizon. Cassandra was already quite warm in her apparel, though she kept a cheerful attitude as they moved along. The sun seemed to compliment this as its early orange glow had beamed impressively across her face. Emily's hair looked quite akin to fire, as the front of its usual white tint was overwhelmed with the bright, burning hue.

Abandoned houses, shacks, and establishments were widespread across both sides of the road, providing more of the brutal history of Achos' recent outrage of its citizens. The only purpose they served right now was aesthetic, offering variety to the rest of the environment.

Taller buildings could be seen getting closer from the horizon as the girls continued onward. If one had to guess, it felt as though an hour had passed so far, though both of them were already getting fairly close.

As the road led straight towards the buildings, Emily noticed siderails a short distance away, and squinted in curiosity. Her eyes also darted around both sides of the road, seeing a decent amount of shrubbery lined up along an abstract edge. She worked up to a jog as she resumed down the path. The rails along the road turned out to form into a bridge, and Emily's face lit up once she peered over to look beneath.

"It's a river!" she cheered.

There were plants and shrubs covering much of their side of the water, and so they needed to cross the bridge to the other side first. The first thing that had Cassandra's interest was a chance to soak her tired feet in the cool currents. Perhaps if there wasn't too much risk to do so, the girls may even bathe in the river while they're here.

As she crossed the bridge, Emily took in the sight of the running water, as even both of the girls associated it as a rarity in their lifestyles. Emily's excitement in finding it was already refreshing, despite her hesitation with coming. However, her enthusiasm had silenced as her eyes followed the river's currents to the north.

At a distance, seen from the other side of the bridge, was an enormous structure laid to ruin across half of the river's width. It appeared to be a tall building that had fallen, likely by explosives. Several kinds of birds were to be seen flocking in and around the

wreckage. Nearby, at the shallower side of the waters, were partially-sunken and abandoned vehicles of all different varieties.

As Emily stared at it, she couldn't help but wonder if any people had gotten stuck, and left behind to die in the building or the wrecked cars. Had anyone gone over there to find out if other people were waiting for help to arrive?

Neither of the girls had said anything while they looked upon it from afar. While Cassandra had gotten a lump in her throat, she tried to pull Emily back to focusing on crossing the bridge.

They both walked down the bank to the river, and filled up all the bottles that were initially empty. While they were both happy to have found water, they knew they couldn't drink any of it yet. Unfortunately that this was the case, as the sun's heat had been rising just as it was.

At this point, the best news the girls had gotten was a street sign indicating that they had both arrived in Norris Rock.

The first thing the girls had seen as they continued moving were pockets of run-down shacks, lined with growing crops along the sides and whatever soil space could qualify as a backyard. Emily's muscles all tensed up, feeling as if people behind these shacks were looking directly at both of them. Where it made her anxious and defensive, Cassandra had only gotten more motivated from being watched upon. It made her feel as if they saw her as important.

It had taken a few minutes before the girls could explore more of the actual town, but unlike Thomaston, there were clearly signs of the place being inhabited. Trash was organized into spaces that people could use for shelter, as well as a possible food source. A few fire pits could be seen still burning in the centers of the spaces.

Emily knew better than to have pity for these people having to make the best of their surroundings; she knew how strong these people really were. Cassandra, on the other hand, hadn't realized this. She couldn't see how one could make themselves comfortable in these circumstances, even if she and her friend had been doing just that.

Although, this may partially be due to her concerns with finding the ones who made the broadcast yesterday.

As they continued walking, the larger buildings of Norris Rock had made themselves known. Also unlike Thomaston, this town was sparsely surrounded with tall buildings. It would seem likely that some who lived in Thomaston would have had to drive to Norris Rock to go to their jobs. Everything appeared so industrial, something neither of the girls were used to.

The two of them had stopped at the first block, eyeing the location sternly.

"I wonder where the radio station is," Cassandra whispered.

"What are we looking for?" Emily asked.

"A tall tower, like a slimmed-down pyramid, on top of a building."

"Towers on buildings? Cities are weird, I'm glad I don't remember ever having lived in one."

"Just because you don't remember, it doesn't mean never."

"Let's just keep..."

Emily had picked up movement from her left peripheral field of vision. Cassandra looked up a little before she could fully respond to the teen's pause in her speech. Three young women in hijabs were coming down the sidewalk from the block ahead of them. They were talking and giggling with each other, before noticing Cassandra and Emily.

"Good afternoon!" the trio called out.

"Hello, thank you!" Cassandra shouted back. "You too!"

Emily said nothing, only turning away from them with a cross look on her face. The three girls evidently noticed, as they reacted rather concernedly before continuing on down the street. Cassandra looked prepared to shout something else, but she was too late; the three of them were already too far down the sidewalk.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"I know their type," Emily growled. "I can already smell their manipulative, back-stabbing nature."

Cassandra immediately picked up on the implication, smacking the back of the girl's head like a strict mother.

"And what was that for!?" Emily whined.

"Come on, Emily, you can't expect every person that wears a cloth around their heads to have brutal, lunatic tendencies wrapped up underneath."

Emily had kept quiet after the scolding, now realizing how prejudiced she just sounded. She leaned over forward, the heat starting to get to her as well as the weight of guilt.

"Let's keep going," said Cassandra, "we'll just have to pay attention to the streets and see if the radio station will pop up somewhere."

Without that much of a lead, the two girls nonchalantly trekked onwards. Despite all the evidence of people occupying most of the roads, the place appeared quite desolate, with the exception of the three women. Emily hadn't said anything, but her focus was on finding someone, perhaps on asking for directions.

Within an extra few minutes, the two of them had walked to the end of the next block. The tall structures standing from all around had given Emily a sinking feeling in her gut. Ahead of them was a pile of broken furniture, lined up with a broken window visible at the ninth floor. Lucky for everybody else, there was no dead body found near the pile.

Emily looks towards the left of the street they had arrived upon, and picks up movement once again.

Walking quickly behind one of the buildings on the other end was a figure with a dull yellow skirt. Emily squinted with uncertainty, though she felt as though she'd seen that kind of color somewhere before.

Cassandra was mumbling to herself, only concerned with finding the way towards the radio station. She looked to the left and right of the road, seeing nothing relating to their goal. The thought of looking both ways despite there being no active cars was enough to make Cassandra chuckle.

They persisted down to the next block, and Emily caught a sound somewhere, like a giggling. She looked behind, and far down to the other end of the previous block was the three women with hijabs. One of them was wearing a dull yellow skirt, now fueling Emily's anxiety of the cityscape. She turns back forward, hoping that it's just a coincidence.

"Oh, duh!" Cassandra said, "if we're looking for a radio tower, we should've looked upward. See Emily, the tower is just over a couple blocks that way."

She pointed down the right side of the street, and Emily's feet felt like collapsing at the simple mention of a couple more blocks.

This time, they had to walk around, over, and through a few trash piles to continue their pursuit. At least one of them had an occupant asleep near the sidewalk, to lessen the feeling of isolation. Neither of the girls had figured that Norris Rock had been as big as it was. While sliding down another trash pile, Emily had looked towards her right side, down into an alleyway. Nobody was in there, but she kept a cautious eye.

Once reaching the next block, Cassandra stopped momentarily to drink from a bottle of water from the freezer back at Sheila's. Emily scanned around more casually, intent to keep herself relatively familiar with the surroundings. As her head swung back around forward, the three women were seen walking down the sidewalk just ahead of them.

"Cassie," she whispered, "Cassie, I don't feel like this is a good place to be."

"Why would you say that?" Cassandra replied, "there's barely a soul to be seen around here. If you're this uptight, maybe a dip in the river is a better idea than we thought."

"No, no. You know the three, erm... Hispanic-Indian-or-something women from a little while ago? I think they're following us."

"Really, now? I haven't seen a dang thing that would point that out."

"Just pay attention, they're around, I swear."

"By the way, they're Middle-Eastern."

The two girls continued down the block up and across from them, as the radio station was now just on the other side. Emily bit her lip and furrowed her brows, completely entranced with finding the trio of women. Cassandra had put on a confident smile in preparation to meet a load of people. In spite of her assurance, she hadn't noticed that a plastic wrapper got stuck on her shoe. To boot, there were small drops of a dark, dirty, and unknown liquid stuck inside.

Emily took a few deep breaths to herself, and they resumed to the corner of the block. Cassandra turned around to the girl, throwing her arms up in submission.

"Well, Em," she said, "we walked up to this side of the block, and I have seen no sign of the three women anywhere."

"You're seriously trying to disprove me," said Emily, "after what hasn't even been two minutes?"

"Well, you sounded pretty sure, so I made the effort to check. If they were following us, I would have found them by now."

"It's pretty foggy up there in the clouds, Cassie."

"Don't make fun of me. You're being overly paranoid, like you usually..."

Cassandra turned back around, where a large trash barricade was occupied by four men carrying rifles, all staring right at them.

"Who are you?" the biggest one commands.

Chapter 11:

"I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep; I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion."

- Alexander the Great

Cassandra readjusted her posture and self immediately, while Emily hunched over defensively, similar to what some sorts of wrestlers would do. Though she had no intention of throwing any punches now, she wasn't prepared to let herself get pressed into a disadvantageous position. Cassandra cleared her throat, smiling nicely towards the men.

"Good afternoon," she began, "I am Cassandra Streit, and this is Emily Wasima, my best friend and accomplice."

Emily straightened herself up and made a questioning face towards her friend for being labeled as she was.

"We don't know you," the dark man said, "and though trespassing isn't illegal anymore, most people don't like 'em any more than they would've back then."

From the side of the barricade, the three women in hijabs appeared, chuckling to themselves in plain view of the two girls.

"Oh, no worries," Cassandra assured, "we seek no trouble. We just stopped by because we heard one of your boys in a radio broadcast yesterday."

Emily's eyes widened as the young woman was being so upfront in her statements.

"Radio broadcast?" the man asked. "What radio broadcast?"

"Oh, apparently one of your guys was messing around in that radio station and managed to make it come to life. We just happened to have a stereo with us, and we tuned in at the right time in the right place... the rest is just connecting the dots."

"I see. Thank you for the information."

The man turned to face one of the men behind him, the other two following suit. The guy singled out started looking around randomly, playing dumb with body language.

"Say, would you happen to have been the other guy we heard on the broadcast?" Cassandra questioned.

"You heard *another* one of our guys?" the man asked.

"Oh yeah, he was trying to discourage the other into shutting everything down, and that's when we heard about you guys having arms."

The man reached down, picked up a screwdriver from the pile, and threw it at the one man up on the pile. He lost his balance and fell somewhere behind the barricade.

"What else do you know?" he asked.

"We just heard that you guys were specifically here in Norris Rock," Cassandra stated.

Emily was quietly contemplating how she vastly underestimated her friend's ability to be totally straightforward with strangers. This conversation was becoming lost to her.

"Alright," the man muttered, "you heard about us and our arms. Did you come specifically to tell us that, or is there something else as to why you're here?"

"Well, it's funny," said Cassandra, "it's exactly with finding out you have arms that I thought that you can join us in our cause."

Emily's eyes sunk to the ground like anchors, avoiding eye contact with the large, black man. The three men on the barricade looked at each other, puzzled what to make of this.

"What is this 'cause' you refer to?" the man asked.

"Rebuilding Achos back to its former glory," Cassandra said, smiling.

The man covered his mouth, with a face that obviously shows he was just about ready to burst out laughing. The one guy from behind didn't even try hiding it, and he had a glass bottle thrown at him. Emily now looked quite contempt with them finding hilarity with her friend, though she remained silent.

"Well now," the man chuckled, "that's a real gutsy goal you two have got there."

"We mean every word," said Cassandra.

"Alright, alright. Truth is, this is something we'll have to bring up to our boss. While we here might not be too optimistic of the idea, we don't call the shots around here."

"We could just give 'em the shots right now, Cole," the one man said from behind.

"And at what point did you think that you'd make things any easier with your talking?"

"Free expression, man."

"Oh, right. I forgot. Here, let me express my guilt."

The tall man lobbed a brick straight at him. The guy blocked it with a steel bowl he found and wore, but was immediately distressed by the loud, painful vibrations it caused. He could be faintly heard muttering "bad idea, bad idea" to himself.

"So," Cassandra said, "is your, erm, 'boss' somewhere we may speak with them?"

"Why yes," Cole nodded, "however, we still have no reason as to take you to him. What would we gain from helping you two?"

"*Carnal knowledge!*" the one man shouted.

"Mike, take that young man inside and super-glue his tongue to a urinal."

One of the guys grabbed him and pulled him down off the barricade, and neither of them were seen again.

"Apologies," Cole mumbled, "go on."

"Well," Cassandra resumed, "the neighboring town to the west, Thomaston, has plenty of storage sheds left unexplored, and a diner we found to have running electricity and make for a comfier shelter than in a trash pile along the city streets."

Emily looked up at Cassandra in near shock, as that almost sounded like an insult to the guys they were talking to.

"Though all-in-all," said Cassandra, "we're mostly just two ambitious young ladies that hopes that a lot of strong, capable men can take the time to help us get up off our feet."

"Hmm," Cole sighed, looking at Emily. "She's been awful quiet this whole time. Tell me, girl, what're you thinking about all of this?"

"I mostly think this is just a waste of our time," Emily said. "No large, powerful gang would be interested in helping two measly girls get in the spotlight while they tag along as only the runner-ups. We don't have enough food to sustain everyone but ourselves, we have limited resources, the storage sheds are always wild cards, and my general distrust of gangs overall, plus my friend's natural fault in trusting everyone she meets, would likely lead to mine and her failure to reach our goal, if not just death outright."

Cassandra was rather impressed with the teen's articulation, as pessimistic as it was. Cole crossed his arms and raised his eyebrow, looking over the teen.

"Well I'm sorry you believe that," Cole commented. "That kind of thinking is indeed problematic, for both of us. However, it's because of that thinking that I believe the boss would be interested in seeing you two."

Emily's jaw dropped while Cassandra smiled brightly at her. Cole motioned for them to follow him up the barricade, and they made their way into a building next to the radio station. Emily grimaced a little with the fact that after all that walking, they never really got to go into the building they were looking for in the first place.

Inside the establishment was a surplus of inhabitants, of every shape, size, and color. They all talked amongst each other, with chatter filling up the space of the entire first floor. Cassandra's eyes lit up in awe to be able to see so many people together in one place, while Emily kind of cringed.

Cole walked through the small crowd, and a few people greeted him quite friendly-like. Both of the girls followed him the best they can, and they had to hold onto each other so that they wouldn't get lost in the mass of people. Cole gestured up a flight of stairs, and they continued upward. Only a few people were seen on the next floor, though what filled the room were what used to be office desks and cubicles. Chairs were knocked over, filing cabinets were mismatched and worn down, and papers of various written business nonsense were everywhere on the floor.

They crossed the room, and headed for a hallway to the right. At the very end was a closed door, while all the other doors along the sides were open and free to access. Cassandra noticed a rustling, and noticed the plastic bag covering her shoe. She kicked it off before walking further, and the timing was just right that it got caught on Emily's shoe. She looked at Cassandra from behind with an annoyed face, as if to say, "really?"

Cole stopped in front of the closed door.

"Wait right here," he said.

Chapter 12:

"When a trans woman is called a man, that is an act of violence."

- Laverne Cox

The large man went through the door, and both of the girls were surprised he could actually fit through it. They could both hear his voice behind the glass, and a different voice could be faintly heard. It was too muffled to really distinguish any qualities of the second voice, as well as any words they said. Emily was partially expecting an even bigger man than Cole, though she immediately disregarded it. It's hard to top that man in sheer size.

Cole opened the door in front of them, allowing them inside. The anterior wall was a large window, while the walls to the left and right were shelves that were stacked with weapons and ammunition of all

sorts. Besides the wide window, directly in front of the girls was a large, pristine wooden desk, and a figure turned away facing the window in a black swivel chair.

"So clue me in, you two," a lighter voice said. "Cole 'ere tells me you wanna be buddy-buddy with me and the rest of my crew."

The person turned around sharply, staring directly at Cassandra. They had a shaved head, black glasses, and wore men's jeans with a blue office shirt. In spite of the attire, they also had painted nails, a feminine voice, and a rather evident pair of C-cups. Cassandra hesitated to start talking, not sure how to address the boss.

"Well?" they asked, "if you have nothin' to spit out, then you're both wastin' my time."

"Ahem," Cassandra began, "pardon me. I'm Cassandra Streit, and yes, I wish for you and your gang to join us in our goal to bring Achos back onto its feet."

The person slammed a hand hard onto their desk, though whether it was in shock or irritation, no one could tell.

"Well now," they said, "that sounds like a pretty tall order, big stranger. I've got a lot on my plate these days, y'see? I gotta take care o' many people in this part o' the city. Who's to really say whether 'r not any of 'em really feel like the idea of bein' friends?"

"If it's what you get in exchange that you're worried about," Cassandra said, "then we must be honest, in terms of material goods, we don't have a lot. Just a handful of storage sheds waiting to be rummaged through, and a cozy shelter in a diner."

"We got both o' those," the boss said, "but nah, that's not what I'm gettin' at. I'm sayin', what makes you a special enough case that we're willing to stick our necks out for ya?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Alright, then let's start with step one. My name is Logan, and I am in charge of th' territory 'round here."

"Logan?" Emily asked. "Isn't that a boy's name?"

"It is a boy's name, li'l miss!" Logan raised their voice. "Maybe consider their choice of identity next time you address someone who looks like me. Got it?"

Cassandra nodded in realization, comforted with the knowledge of how to address Logan. Emily flinched a little by his reaction to her comment, but it still hadn't quite set in yet.

"So now you know what I do," Logan continued. "Now what do *you* do? Does anyone look up to you, rely on you? Or are you both just, I dunno, tryin' to last each day like the rest o' people 'round down there?"

Honestly, it'd make more sense to me if *you* joined *us*. In which case, I can't be botherin' with ya. No need for pr'fessionalism, just talk around, meet an' know the folks, and eventually become a face in th' crowd. You get'cher protection, we get a stronger community, ever'body wins. Are we done here?"

Cassandra was dumbstruck and yet impressed that this young man had shot her down.

"Okay," Emily muttered, "I know we don't seem like much to you, lady, but you really don't know how much Cassandra can really do."

"Can she stop ya from repeatedly callin' me a chick?" Logan growled.

"Whatever, the point is, you really don't know what you're passing up. I'm not kidding when I say that Cassandra could very well change the state of the nation. Why keep the peace of just a portion of the country when the *entire* thing could be brought to peace?"

Logan got up from his seat and walked over to Emily, grabbing her shirt collar.

"Have ya ever thought that maybe peace ain't the answer?" he snarled. "The last time we were promised a good country, millions o' good people were gettin' screwed over every day. Whenever I hear the word 'peace', I only see the guys who went up to those podiums, wave and smile to the public while spewin' lie after lie, after freakin' lie. They made a furious crapsack of a leadership, all in the name o' what they said was 'peace'. After all that they did to us, and to my kind o' people, there's no way I'm gonna say I'm on the same side as a lyin', worthless, cowardly, *evil-as-fuck country leader*!"

Emily was also shut up by the young man, but her stern face kept true. Logan was breathing heavily, his face red, but let go of Emily before walking a few steps to simmer down. He motioned his hand to Cole, who handed him a cigarette.

"That's a history lesson for ya," Logan said, "the whole affair wit' running Achos to the ground and hurtin' my brothers and sisters, that's what made me stockpile on a buncha weapons. I figured if one o' them is still alive, I can't wait to unload a cloud o' fire on their li'l heads. They at least deserve that much."

"I'm curious," Emily said, "how old are you?"

"Twenny-four."

"Why is a woman as-- er, *man*, as young as you so angry over a time of rule you weren't even born to experience?"

"Oh, what? You think I gotta be there to see the injustice, cruelty, and violence to really know what I'm talkin' about? I did my homework, out of anyone that was victimized from the corruption, the trans folks

often got a lot of the first whacks. The damn policies o' those officials had incarcerated many of 'em. They were given piss-poor trials, convicted as felons, locked up, and all because they wanted to be who they were born to be."

"You didn't know them, how could you feel so enraged for them?"

"They were my *family*, you retarded little skank!"

Logan shoved a load of desk tools onto the floor in his fury. Cassandra had her black journal in hand, and stepped forward between Logan and Emily. Her face was calm, but she sternly stared at the angry man.

"We're sorry," she said softly. "Please forgive Emily, she doesn't know as much about Achos' history as you and I do. We will leave if you ask us to, but I will tell you something."

She closed the book, Logan taking a puff from his cigarette. The bad vibe he gave off had begun to dissipate as he breathed out a cloud of smoke. Cassandra raised her head and crossed her arms.

"Don't ever believe," she said, "that I am not already on your side. I will fight for your people, and any minority that had difficulties during that time. I am no enemy. I don't aim to be a leader for power, what I want is to make things right. I know so many people who need hope now more than ever, and I will serve them."

Logan gave a contemplative sigh, walking back and resting on his office chair once again. He looked at Cole, who only stood stoic as he laid witness to the discussion. Logan made a gesture to him, to which he places his big hands on Emily's shoulders.

"The boss needs to speak alone with your friend," he says.

Emily gave a concerned look to Cassandra as she was escorted out. Her stomach ached with a sense of unease. Cassandra gave an assuring smile as the door was closed behind her.

Chapter 13:

"In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limits that it discovers in itself - limits where minds meet, and in meeting, begin to exist."

- Albert Camus

Logan folded his hands to his face, looking down. Cassandra waited patiently as the man sorted through whatever thoughts she couldn't tell he had. In an effort to keep his anger under control, he began cracking all of his knuckles and neck, relieving some tension.

"You know," he said, "we're both kinda similar if we back up and look at ourselves. If you despise the corruption as much as I do, you've got cause to be as strong as I've gotten."

"Perhaps," Cassandra acknowledged. "I'm not sure I'm so willing or eager to collect as many arms as you have."

"Heh. More than not soundin' like it, you'd prob'ly not even know where to get 'em. However, I dunno if your li'l friend is quite like you, though. Even if she's sharin' the same dream you do, her fiesty personality might only seem to hold you back. One o' these days, she might snap, an' not think so highly of you anymore. Believe me, I gotta take charge over people a lot like her."

"I'm mostly hoping she'll grow out of that. She's still young enough not to really see everything that comes of her actions."

Logan takes a puff of his cigarette, and Cassandra's nostrils get slightly irritated by the exposure to second-hand smoke. She had crossed her arms tightly, though kept a gentle expression so not to aggravate Logan any more than Emily has. She passed a glance to the closed door, curious how she was doing.

"Still," said Cassandra, "even if it's my goal to fix up the country, I can't deny I couldn't have made this much progress had I not met her."

"I s'pose she believes your trust in people is foolish?" Logan sighed.

"She's commented on that fact a few times."

"Then she's already startin' to doubt you. I wouldn't find it all that shocking if she's takin' pity on the ones who caused all this pain."

"I don't think it's fair to jump to conclusions like that, my good man. Emily has a history of detesting such people. Though she might not treat it the same way I do, I see her as a firm ally. Also, I fail to see how relevant this is to whether or not you'll join us."

"I'm just makin' sure I know both of you two alright," Logan smirked.

"Speaking of which," Cassandra said, "if you find us to have a similar outlook to you, I don't quite understand what your reasoning could be to hesitate. Wouldn't it mean greater things for both of us if we collaborated?"

Logan took one last puff of his cigarette before extinguishing it in an ash tray upon his desk. He rhythmically rolled his fingers across the surface, thinking of a reply.

"I suppose it's 'cause I don't trust strangers," he said.

"Well," Cassandra muttered, "I believe this entire meeting was to convince you to trust in me. If I've failed, then feel free to name the prerequisites."

Logan spun his chair forward, with a grin on his face.

"Miss Streit, I honestly like your ambition. It's somethin' I can get behind, now that I've gotten to know a li'l more about'cha. However, my alliance doesn't come easy for just any."

From behind the girl, Cole had come back into the room, nodding in Logan's direction. Cassandra flinched from the large man's re-entry. She looked back to Logan, now with a more puzzled expression.

"You have your goal," Logan said, "you have your cause, you got'cher character; but now, I need to know your drive. What lengths are ya willing to go to to make sure this dream o' yours comes true? This is somethin' you cannot give me with words, or else I can't really believe ya. It's not much, just prove to me who you really are. Your friend Emily is bein' kept downstairs, in a locked storage closet, guarded by my men. You got six hours to find 'er, and get 'er outta there. If you can't, we'll kill 'em. Now's the time to show me: what can you really do, Miss Streit?"

Cole grabbed Cassandra across the waist-up, restricting movement of her arms. A lot of her breath was knocked out of her, as the man's arms refused to budge with her squirming. She was lifted up from the ground, and carried out of the office. Logan turned to face the window, watching quietly over the ruins of Norris Rock.

Chapter 14:

"Here we are, trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no why."

- Kurt Vonnegut

Cassandra was thrown into a small, empty room with Cole standing in front of the exit out. Her chest felt bruised from being tightly held by Cole's impressive arm strength. She coughed until her breathing was able to return to normal, and she looked upon the man as he stood in front of her. He didn't return her gaze, as if truly taking the position and demeanor of a security guard. Cassandra scooted across the floor to the

other wall, and remained silent. Despite the six-hour time limit being in motion, she needed some time to figure out a solution for everything.

The one thing Cassandra was able to keep on her person was her black journal. She stared at the cover, which was too simple to have any profound meaning by itself. The white tag for a customized title was even left blank.

She opened it up, and the first thing written in it was a reminder for herself:

"One-thousand forces will be written in this book, or else she doesn't truly know what power she holds."

Cassandra had written this passage a long time ago, when she first acquired the journal. As she put down archives of the conflicts she's influenced over past couple of years, that beginning phrase put down a specific goal for herself: if she wrote over a thousand records, her abilities will be mastered. Of course, she couldn't just write every single thing she's done simply for the sake of this black book.

The young woman flipped through page after page, after page. She scanned and browsed through each entry, her methods, and each result she learned. After looking through for the span of a few minutes, she thought in silence once more.

She recalled the short time ago that she told Emily she can't simply manipulate people and their actions or affairs as she wanted to anymore. Though it was almost all because of moral obligation, the secondary goal written in the black journal was another reason.

Cassandra had to figure out if the use of her powers here would be a good time, and if so, then how should they be used?

Emily had been restrained by ropes around her wist, wrists, and ankles. Three of Logan's gangmembers just watched her, smug with the feisty captive they've been given. When she was being carried away, she was determined to fight, and persistent to escape. Now that she's trapped in a room with three buttheads, she learned that ferocity wasn't going to help her now. At least, not until she can find a way to get free.

"Watch out boys," one of the guys chuckled, "this one's white-hot."

"Oh, really?" another scoffed, "a nasty little fighter, eh? Quite a ladybug, heh."

Emily shook her head in annoyance with the jokesters teasing her. She took amusement in the knowledge that ladybugs often eat puny,

crop-threatening pests, and these three certainly seemed like no exception. Regardless, even if she couldn't get herself free, she knew Cassandra would learn about this. She had some awareness that despite her friend's typical absent-minded nature, she doesn't give her enough credit for how crafty she can really be.

Emily felt herself get knocked down onto the floor from something hitting her in the side. One of the guys keeping watch of her had kicked her, the other two laughing along with it. It didn't really hurt, but Emily was already getting tired of these one-dimensional bully types of goons. It was within moments after the blow that she started getting different kinds of ideas. The optimistic expressions she made got one of the men to arch his brows in confusion.

"You think she's one of those kinda people," he said, "who likes getting kicked and beaten around? What're they called?"

"Oh, like mariners," another replied, "or mooners, or something starting with an M."

Emily rolled her eyes. Not only did they get a regular kick out of schadenfreude, but now they're idiots to put the cherry on top. What kind of place do these people come from that make them lack any sense of decency?

"Well, maybe we should stop beating her up," one of them stated, "otherwise she'd like that. No more kicks or punches, little ladybug!"

Emily decided to play along for the sake of some sort of relief, and made a pouty-face to the three guys. They just laughed at her, but one of them quickly stopped.

"Say, guys," the one said, "I don't get why they're not wriggling and struggling anymore, or calling for help or anything. Isn't that what hostages usually do?"

The two other guys stopped laughing, and were now caught up with bewilderment. Emily took the opportunity to keep thinking through the various plans that popped into her head.

Cassandra looked up towards Cole, where the gears in her head worked fervently to come up with something worth putting into action. She couldn't figure out exactly how to play to this large man's good side, as she barely knew anything about him. She even knew Logan better than him, and only in the span of about ten minutes.

She couldn't find too many other options at her disposal. Her powers need to be used. Based on what she knew about Logan and his motivations, she could likely think of a way to assert herself on him without conflict manipulation. Cole, however, there's only one way she can do it. You can't start a chess game without moving a pawn.

"You know," said Cassandra, "I would've figured a bunch of gang men would be able to find better turf to occupy. Were shopping malls too last season?"

"This isn't a beauty pagaent," Cole muttered, "we take what's useful. This building is the most sound location for a base."

"I don't know, if this place of operations were as useful as you claim, everyone would be armed and dangerous. Don't you think everybody needs a shot at defending their own?"

"They chose to have us handle their security."

"Oh, so they're like livestock?"

Cole gave a sharp glare at the woman, but gave no more aggression than a firm grunt.

"I just figured," Cassandra resumed, "you know, since Logan is all 'liberty for all of us', like I kind of am, the people around would have more voices than just one."

"What's up with you?" Cole grumbled. "You hadn't been bitching about us until just now. Plus, I'd say if I were in your position, I wouldn't be tossing around words like nunchuks."

"Don't you think you deserve better than what Logan's given?"

"I am Logan's second-in-command. Ask me about our history, I dare you."

"If you insist. What did he promise you for your services?"

Cole lowered his arms, his fingers rolling into fists as if his body was responding to a challenge. Cassandra just gave an exaggerated shrugging gesture, following in after her inquiry.

"This entire building is turned against you," Cole said sternly, "and unless you're wanting more pain for yourself, I recommend you shut the hell up."

"Oh dear," Cassandra gasped, "did I say something to upset you? I'm sorry, let's start over. Hi, I'm Cassandra. I know only a little about Logan, so I'm very prone to questioning his character and practices."

"Then how about you start asking real questions and not bother with the passive-aggressive comments?"

"Passive-aggressive? *Moi*? Absolutely not, I'm just a reasonable young woman."

"A 'reasonable young woman' wouldn't go out of her way to piss off an enemy."

"Angering her enemy? Well then, by all means, tell me whatever it is you're keeping to yourself about Logan."

The large, dark man was actively growing more aggressive, without much of an outlet to let out some steam. His hand hovered over a holster on the side of his belt, and Cassandra grew wary of this.

"Just shut up," Cole growled, "or so help me goddamn it, I will make the bones in your body cry for the sweet, heavenly relief of amputation."

"How dare you, young man!" Cassandra huffed. "Threatening to break the bones of a reasonable young woman, what nerve!"

"Bottled anger explodes in the face of whoever opens it, girl."

"How can we be so sure it's the anger speaking, though? It could be something else that feels terrible, like jealousy, disgust, or impatience. Oh! What I think it might just be is *regret*!"

Cole grimaces at the woman, pulling out a handgun from the holster and aiming right for her kneecap. He fires once as he lets out a loud roar, and prepares for a verbal lashing to follow up with it, but hesitates.

Cassandra stands upright, rubbing her ears from the noise of the gunshot, and then looks to her side. She twirls her foot to account for any injury, but there is none, and she shrugs.

The man fires another shot, aimed for her foot. The bullet's tip can be seen landing softly on the surface of Cassandra's shoe, and is suspended in mid-air for a moment before gently dropping to the hard floor with a *ding*. The girl hardly reacts as she looks down at the failed projectile.

The rage that had built up inside Cole subsided and converted into anxiety upon witnessing the ineffectiveness of his firearm. His eyes repeatedly switched between Cassandra's unfazed face, and the bullet on the floor. He slowly put away his gun back in his holster, though it was tricky; his hands were shaky with the surplus of energy he used up.

"Who the hell are you?" Cole mumbled.

"Someone who's eager to help," Cassandra said calmly.

"H-How did you do that? What crazy, voodoo crap are you pulling on me?"

"It's a long explanation, and time is of the essence. How much time do I have left? Five and a half hours? Hmm. Nah, I'll tell you some other time."

Cassandra walked up to Cole, who flinched backwards towards the wall, but stayed calm enough to recognize she meant no harm. She put out her hand to the large man.

"Think you and a few of your friends could help me out?" she asked.

Cole's heavy breathing began to slow, but he was still hesitant.

"I tried to shoot you," he stifled. "Tried to kill you."

"It's not your fault," Cassandra chuckled, "*believe* me."

The man let out a deep breath, and reached back for the girl's hand, giving a brief, but firm shake. Cassandra hadn't quite anticipated the tight pressure caused by his finger strength, despite the guy's obviously bulky physique.

Cole sighed, and turned to open the door, allowing the girl out. Being on the first floor, some of the people gathered around had briefly looked to them both, and a few were noticeably surprised with seeing Cassandra walk out at all. However, most of them thought nothing of it.

Cassandra thought for a minute, trying to figure out what to do next. Cole was still utterly puzzled over the course of the past few minutes, but he remained quiet. While in the midst of these people chattering with each other, Cassandra realized she couldn't think right without mostly silence. She turned to Cole, her face evidently showing how stuck she was.

"My friend is in a storage room somewhere," she said.

"Are you expecting me to defy Logan even further than I have?" said Cole.

"I'm not saying you have to, but it would help me if I at least knew where to look."

"Over on the south wall is the bathrooms. The door next to it is where she's probably being kept. If any of me and Logan's men have any sense though, it'll probably be locked."

"Thank you kindly. Feel free to do whatever, I'll be right back."

"So just what do you expect me to do, now that I know what you're able to do?"

"Just whatever feels right with you."

Cassandra hurried over to the stairway to the second floor, leaving Cole to think to himself. As she ascended upward, two rifle barrels lined up to her behind the corner. One of them looked like a typical gangmember, while the other was one of the women in hijabs from a while ago.

"What do you think you're doing here?" the woman asked. "What have you done to Cole down there? He wouldn't back down without a fight."

"I think I might've changed that, I don't know," Cassandra nervously chuckled.

"Just start talking."

"Okay. Cole is unharmed, he's just downstairs with the rest of the folks. I convinced him to let me go. I'm just here to see Logan again."

The woman sneered at Cassandra, before reaching to push her forwards. She gestured at her partner to go downstairs for a confirmation. Cassandra couldn't turn to face her at all, under the grounds she was at gunpoint, but she still made a smile for the woman.

"Your clothes look really cute, you know," she said.

"They're hand-me-downs," the woman replied in monotone.

The second gunman returned from the stairs, nodding that Cassandra was telling the truth. The woman asserted another push behind the brown-haired girl, allowing her to continue to Logan's office. Needless to say, Cassandra was only more put-off with the situation with seeing the entire floor completely trashed. She half-wondered if there were no perfectionist-types of people wandering around here.

The woman eventually led Cassandra from behind all the way to the door where Logan was waiting. Cassandra broke some of the tension she had with a deep breath, before proceeding inside.

Chapter 15:

"Worry compounds the futility of being trapped on a dead-end street. Thinking opens new avenues."

- Cullen Hightower

As the door to the office opened, the woman exclaimed from behind.

"Logan, sir, you have a visitor."

"Man, a lot o' people seem to be lovin' me today," said Logan, from behind his office chair. "I can't seem to catch a break. There's a looney social zealot I gotta work with, and along with figurin' out what the next meal for my people's gonna be, I got enough stress today. Sorry, whoever you are, it'll have to come later."

"Um, sir?" the woman asserted.

"What? If this's an emergency, then..."

The man turned from his chair to face Cassandra, who just smiled at him.

"Well how 'bout this," he muttered. "Long time no see, buddy ol' pal!"

Logan just began to laugh from his seat, needing to lean forward just to put a hand to his face. He returned Cassandra's smile with his own, only his was riddled with a tone of mischief.

"I'm not sure you got the memo," he softly put, "your friend is downstairs, bein' kept hostage by my guys. You evidently got past Cole, which I'll give you props for that alone, but then you don't go after the girl you came with? Cassie, Cassie, Cassie; you comin' here, back to me, has prob'ly just set'chu up with another obstacle. Tsk, tsk, tsk."

"Trust me," said Cassandra, "I don't really believe what I'm doing is all that much a bad move on my part."

Logan makes an 'oh yeah?' face, and pulls up a gadget from a shelf behind his desk.

"Y'see this?" he continues. "I can use this to talk to my men. I can tell 'em to shoot you on sight, if I wanted to. But y'know what? I won't, 'cause you're somehow good enough to get past my second-in-command. So let's call this, um, throwin' you a bone. I'll give ya a sportin' chance. So by all means, gimme what'chu came here for. I'm all ears."

Cassandra rolled her fingers up into fists, but only to appease how sweaty her palms were. She swallowed down the lump in her throat and took a deep breath. Logan simply stared at her, mockingly patient.

"You mentioned that the reason you're doing this," Cassandra said, "is to test how much drive I have. To see what lengths I was willing to go to for the sake of accomplishing my goals. So I'm here to make a proposition for you."

Logan's eyebrows raised in interest, along with a smug grin.

"I've thought about it," Cassandra resumed, "and I figured if someone else were to rise up and strive for the recovery of Achos, then my legacy wouldn't lose any of the meaning I hold dear. If you let Emily free, I'll let you take my life instead of hers."

Logan raised his hands in surprise. Even the woman holding a gun to Cassandra made a face that looked rather impressed.

"Well now," said Logan, "I'd say you're at the right place if you're lookin' for death. How noble of ya to sacrifice the only life ya have, simply to have someone else on your side live. I might just burst into tears. I salute you, Cassandra Streit, for bein' so willing to take one for the team. Just a reminder though, I'm gonna hold you to your word."

"I know," Cassandra sighed, "let's just get it over with. Emily will understand in time."

Logan pulls a handgun from another shelf in his desk, and checks the load proper. He stands up out of his seat and approaches Cassandra, pointing the barrel directly to her forehead.

"Do you have any parting words, miss martyr?" Logan asked.

"I'm just sorry it all had to come to this," Cassandra stated calmly. Within the moment, Logan pulled the trigger.

The three goons keeping watch over Emily had somehow gone quiet. They were likely getting bored already, which only amused Emily more. When she looked back towards the three guys, she tried to observe the thickness of their muscles, though it was more evident of how thick their leather jackets were. She adjusted her position to sit back upright, and then leaned against the wall, still watching the lackeys.

It was at that point, she figured out what she wanted to do about this mess.

"Man," said Emily, "I'm getting *real* antsy with these ropes. I feel like punching something. Maybe someone, if I get real into it."

"Sorry girly," one of them said, "but we gotta follow the rules. Plus, it wouldn't be a fair fight, I mean look at yourself."

"I think I look pretty dang good for getting into a little scrap. I know your mama said she thought so, too."

The guy turned to the teen with furrowed eyebrows, as expected. Before he could react any more than he has, one of his partners patted him on the shoulder, keeping him in check. Emily made a sultry howl from seeing the gesture.

"I'm so proud you're both expressing real love in such a place," Emily mocked. "Tell me when the wedding is, I'll sing for you guys at the reception."

The second guy took his hand off of the other one's shoulder, in a disgusted fashion. The third guy laughed at them, and they both growled at him, wrapped up in their shallow anger. He then turned to Emily.

"You might be able to get under these guys' skins," he said, "but I'm pretty chill. No matter what you might say, I won't be fazed."

"Probably because it would fly well over your head to see," Emily chuckled.

Immediately, the guy pulled out his rifle and pointed the barrel right at the girl. While the sudden gesture startled her, she didn't have any qualms with laughing internally of how predictable these goonies were.

"You might like getting hurt, ladybug," one of them said, "but we're losing our patience with you. You just might end up feeling a kind of hurt you don't like."

"But you guys seem so reserved," said Emily, "I figured all three of you had enough heart not to beat up a poor little teenage girl like me."

"Don't start making assumptions about us. We can take you on at any point, just give us a reason to."

"Oh, really? How about this: untie me, and I'll take on all three of you at once."

The three men looked at each other, befuddled. They all just snickered, and one of them smacks Emily upside her forehead.

"You ain't worth our energy," one of the guys scoffed.

"Aww!" Emily cooed. "So all of you *do* have hearts after all!"

The guy closest to her pushed one of their boots firmly against her chest, and pressed into it further with every second.

"Congratulations," he said, "I no longer care what the boss thinks. You've had this coming to you for a while now."

With a switchblade, he cuts the restraining ropes around Emily.

"Put 'em up. Ladybugs first."

"You're mistaken about one thing," Emily chortled as she cracked her knuckles, "I like hurting others a lot more than getting hurt myself."

Chapter 16:

"Football is a simple game. Twenty-two men chase a ball for 90 minutes and at the end, the Germans always win."

- Gary Lineker

The office room was dead silent for a moment, with Logan smiling smugly. As requested, he killed the stranger causing him trouble. However, just before he could lower his hand, he noticed that absolutely no large *thud* had followed after his shot. He looked at Cassandra, right

in front of him, and he was completely puzzled with the result. Cassandra only returned his bewildered gaze with a determined stare.

"The hell?" Logan mumbled.

He pressed the barrel of the handgun firmly into Cassandra's forehead, and once again, fired off a round. Immediately, the workings of the gun exploded in his hand, broken pieces digging small slices into Logan's arm. The young woman before him stood unharmed yet again. The woman holding her own gun behind Cassandra aimed her weapon a couple inches behind the head, and followed it up with a shot. The bullet was suspended in mid-air against what was the girl's scalp, before falling to the floor without making a scratch.

"Hehe," Logan chuckled, "seems like you've got a few magic tricks. Good on ya, I never saw anything comin'. I'll still keep my word to you, though. Make the most o' the next few seconds you've got in this life."

Logan walked over to a shelf along the left-side wall of the office. He pulled out a 30-06 bolt-action rifle, and took a moment to grab a couple rounds to load it into the chamber and clip. Cassandra and the hijab-wearing woman stood and watched in silence. Logan made a cheeky face to the brown-haired girl, puckering his lips at her.

"Let's see you pull any crazy tricks with this now," he chuckled.

He swung the firearm up, the stock firmly cradled in with his shoulder, and with the much longer barrel aimed once again between Cassandra's eyes. The roar of the bullet sounded loudly through the walls of the office, and Logan shivered with the satisfying feeling of the rifle recoiling against his body. He quickly worked the bolt action, and glanced to his prize.

No effect; Cassandra still stands in front of the young man, unscathed without even a single flinch or speck of blood. Logan looked upon her with shock, though it began to grow into frustration. He fired a second shot from the rifle, the feedback rippling through his upper body, and only saw no conclusive results. Cassandra shrugged, which only began irritating Logan all the more thoroughly.

With an annoyed growl, he dropped the 30-06 onto the ground and hastily reached for the next weapon he could reach for. Next was a 12-gauge pump shotgun, conveniently loaded already with three shells. The woman behind Cassandra reacted with visible caution, stepping back behind the wall to get out of range.

Logan thrust the firearm into Cassandra's torso this time, and didn't even care to hold it properly like he did with the rifle. The young man quickly emptied the rounds in a short pattern going shoot-pump-thrust, shoot-pump-thrust, shoot-pump. The deadliness of a close-range,

scattered shot from a shotgun was not even close to evident on the girl's unaffected person.

"Alright, you li'l bitch," Logan snarled, "I'm gettin' really tired of this. You just standin' there lookin' like you're hot stuff, huh? I threw you a bone before, how 'bout you throw one to me now? Otherwise, I'll keep movin' up the ladder here. I got plenty of arms, remember? I got no problems with bringin' any of 'em out from their storage, and I'm getting pretty fuckin' tired of you playin' a fool outta me."

Cassandra remained silent, standing nonchalantly in the same spot she always had been the entire time. Logan was visibly seething, with a tight, red face and bared teeth.

"Your funeral, then," he grumbled. "Say bye to your guts, li'l Miss Bitch-Fuck."

Logan tossed aside the 12-gauge, and grabbed a different firearm from the lowest space in the shelf next to him. It appeared like a revolver, except big enough to be held with two hands. Plus, instead of being loaded with bullets, he loaded it with grenades. Cassandra now had made a very concerned face. Her eyes shifted around the room, only now paying attention to how shabby it was. A thought had hit her: how much damage can this building take from Logan's rage? With the next weapon being a grenade launcher, she knew she couldn't just stand around anymore. She pushed the other woman to the wall, bolting from the office room. Logan huffed angrily, not yet ready to give chase as he loads his weapon.

Cassandra made it to the main area of the second floor, though the whole room was so disorganized that it now worked against her footing. Within moments, the sound running feet could be heard from the hallway she escaped from. As Logan came into view from the corner, the first thing he did was shoot a grenade, without too much regard for aim. Unfortunately, it had landed and rolled close by Cassandra. She stumbled to get away towards the stairs, and crouched in pain as the explosion of the grenade made her ears ring.

It was hard for Cassandra to hear it at the moment, but the sound of rushing and some screaming could be heard from the floor below. With the sound of the explosion, everyone inside the building began to evacuate the premises. Several armed gangmembers came up from the stairs, and lined up in order as they raised their guns to Cassandra.

"Put 'em down!" Logan yelled from across the room. "Get outta here, all of ya!"

They looked to each other in confusion, but followed the command and descended back down the stairs.

Cassandra decided to follow suit with the idea, scrabbling forward towards the stairway. She had difficulty regaining her footing, and the *clink* sound of another grenade bouncing off the wall made her struggle even more. She tried leaping down the flights of stairs to gain some distance, though the bones in her legs began to ache from the impact. As she tried leaping down the next set of stairs, she plugged her ears.

As expected, a loud explosion followed, with some clouds of dust falling down from the ledge. The support structures in the ceiling of the first floor were becoming evidently stressed with each grenade being shot. Cassandra figured that it'll have some relief now that Logan is likely to chase her down here.

It was a little strange looking around and now seeing the whole area emptied. Just like the streets outside, there were collected piles of junk used as shelters. In spite of this, the storage room was clearly in sight, and Cassandra stood in position to it. From the stairwell came the loud *whump* of someone skipping a walk down the stairs altogether. The sound of footsteps followed, to which Cassandra turned expectantly to the pissed-off Logan. As they glared at each other, Cassandra swiftly pulled out her black journal.

"What's the matter?" said Logan. "Don't know where to turn? Then how 'bout I help ya decide?"

He raised the barrel of the grenade launcher, a fierce grimace on his face.

"Now just stand still, the ground seems like a good place for ya."

The round was fired directly towards Cassandra. She tightly closed her eyes in anticipation as she dove for the floor, the grenade bouncing off the ground and rolling towards the storage room door. Cassandra covered her ears, and squinted her eyes at the single round in great concentration. In her head, she tried to estimate the thing's countdown, though she was too anxious to make any consistent guess.

The grenade finally burst in front of the door, blasting it off its hinges and against the wall on the other side. Shrapnel had come forth and made many cuts across Cassandra's exposed face, hands, and ankles. Logan had caught a few pieces into their skin as well, though Cassandra took the blunt of it.

Cassandra knelt down to her knees, and arched forward from exhaustion. From the gap made between the lobby and storage room, Emily was seen locking one of the goons with her legs. The other two

were beaten, bruised, and knocked out cold. Emily covered her own ears for a moment, before looking upwards towards Cassandra.

"Cassie!" she shouted. "What've you been doing all this time?"

"Later, Emily," Cassandra huffed, "I'll tell you later."

"What the hell *is* this!?" a voice yelled from the back.

Logan was fuming to himself, cursing and growling at the events unfolding. He pointed the launcher's barrel towards Emily's direction, and the chamber had one shot left laying inside it. He squeezed the trigger as hard as he could, shooting the round across and into the storage room. Cassandra's eyes widened in panic, and she scrambled towards the entrance.

As the round rolled to Emily's feet, she quit the leg-lock and stood up, punting the round over her friend's head and towards an empty space. Not two seconds after, it exploded with no human casualties. A large crack broke out along the wall closest to it.

The young man chucked his emptied weapon against a wall behind him in utter rage. He made a beastly glare towards Cassandra, and burst into a sprint towards her. She was in a sitting position, but prepared for whatever fury would confront her. Logan was quickly approaching and prepared to lunge a fist directly to her face, though Emily was in a bad place to offer any effective protection.

Logan made a large swing, but his fist had missed Cassandra's mug by about six inches. The momentum pulled him off balance, and he tripped onto the ground, face-down.

For a few moments, everything went totally silent.

Chapter 17:

"Make the best of what is in your power, and take the rest as it happens."

- Epictetus

Cassandra, Emily, and the previously-enraged Logan had kept quiet for a good few minutes, absorbing the atmosphere. The girls looked at each other, Cassandra working up a relieved smile. Emily rolled her eyes, but returned the expression with a smirk of her own.

"Why didn't you die?" Logan mumbled.

He sat up from the cold ground, his face reddened from his previous outrage. The expression on his face only seemed to match that of stern annoyance now, along with the inner corners of his eyes watering up.

"You set me up," said Logan, "that's what happened, ain't it? Ya couldn't follow through with the other option, but ya succeeded with gettin' your friend out. You'd planned this all along, didn't ya?"

"I guess I should've warned you beforehand," Emily joked, "at the end of the day, there's nobody out here that matches against Cassie. It's not really your fault, you had no idea what you were up against."

Logan furrowed his brows, evidently insulted with Emily's snarky comment. He sat himself up, and buried his face into the space between his bent knees. Emily approached Cassandra and helped her onto her feet.

"What's happened to me?" Logan grumbled, "what've I done to deserve this? Are ya some kinda karmic messenger put here to punish me for all the past shit I've had to do? Even just today, I lost my temper, blew up a building from the inside out, drove all o' the people I help out and who look up to me, and in the end, it all amounted to no payoff."

"You say that like it's all over," Cassandra said.

Logan looked up towards the girls, still holding a look of contempt on his face.

"What about the past hour and a half," he muttered, "makes you think that it's not all over for me? I *lost*. In this world, only those who succeed will see a world they'd like to see. I gave a home for the people that all ran outside, and it's here that'chu proved to me I can't do that anymore. They won't trust or respect a leader who can't provide for everything, at all times. But now I've *lost*. Everything goes back to square one, and now I know somebody can take me down whenever I feel like I'm back on my feet. Thank you oh-so-much, ya goddamn harpy bitch."

Emily looked up towards Cassandra, who curled their hands into fists. They both shook with frustration, to which she stamped her foot. She firmly stuck one hand towards Logan, open-palmed and completely rigid.

"You might be right," Cassandra said, "everything will go back to square one. The progress you made will no longer matter to the degree that it has until now. However, I think you've forgotten my original proposition. I have every intention to allow you, your friends, and your men to join me."

The young man kept up the irritated appearance, though subtle motions indicated a lightly surprised reaction. Emily turned away, and she couldn't help but furrow her brows and yet grin from her friend's words at the same time. Cassandra relaxed the rest of her body as she was reaching out for Logan.

"You know," she said, "I think it's about time *I* give *you* a little history lesson. About two-hundred years ago, Achos was involved in a war. You know the countries Heigrende and Molotcech, and how they're just an ocean voyage apart from each other? Achos is in between, and an easy trip from either side. Anyway, a Molotese flight squadron asked to make a temporary encampment along the northern shores of Achos, to have a chance to resupplied. The county officials agreed, and the squadron were allowed a week.

"However, during that week, a Heigran trade ship had reached a port nearby, and spotted the encampment. A few escort militiamen reported it back to the military, and only a day after, an attack was launched. The whole shore was blown apart, and there were several civilian casualties along with intensive collateral damage. This was brought to the attention of the nation's government, and they were expectedly angry. The Heigrende government immediately paid for the damages, but the Achosian Republic had never really forgiven them.

"Then, during the last few years before the anarchy overcame the country, they used this incident in creating propaganda against the Heigrans. They tried to build up a public that despised and wanted to make an enemy out of Heigrende. However, what they overlooked was that it was our main source of international trade. The rest that followed is what resulted in what our lives are like today. A government was run to the ground by the same people they tried to appeal to, and part of the motivation was enforcing a grudge."

Logan stared at Cassandra, his frustration gradually ceasing as she spoke.

"So what I'm saying with that is," she stated, "I'm not prepared to keep this incident against you. Whatever anger is left will ultimately tear you down, and I refuse to make obstacles like that for myself. I can't do that, not when I can make my home a better place again."

The young man peered down, in thought. Towards his right, he caught movement from a distance. It was Cole, watching the three in silence while a crowd of people came in behind him. They all watched with curiosity and concern for their leading figure. His eyes widened a little, and his tears finally fell.

"It's your choice, sir," Cassandra said with a smile, "but I'll ask again: would you like to join us for a new home? A better home?"

The loud sound of falling debris up above had broken the silence around them, to where a rumbling sound followed from every direction. The ceiling began to crack, and cave in on itself.

Logan grabbed Cassandra's hand, and she pulled him up onto his feet to start running out. The crowd near the exit didn't have far to go, though nobody knew if it was really everyone. Cole stayed behind a moment to make sure Logan stayed ahead of the collapsing. He neglected to keep watch for Cassandra or Emily.

The two girls had decided to try running and climbing over a trash pile for a shortcut. Emily fell through a cardboard box, and from that moment her leg became stuck in and amidst the pile. She searched for the right thing to lift off her leg, though her positioning wasn't favorable for herself. Cassandra looked back to Emily, and slid back down the garbage pile to help her get free. The different office furniture and decor from the floor above them began to fall down whatever crevices and holes they fit through.

In moments, a filing cabinet, desk, and some of the ceiling debris fell onto the girls.

"Cassie," said Emily, "this crap is getting me more stuck. I can't lift this much weight; you need to use your power. Get us out of this!"

Cassandra had difficulty holding the weight on her back, and she couldn't focus on her friend's face. She gritted her teeth and gasped as she strained herself, but she couldn't push anything off of herself.

"Emily," she panted, "I'm tired."

The teen glared towards the struggling Cassandra, her eyes widening as the situation was becoming more known to her.

"I'm too tired, Emily," Cassandra whimpered.

The weight of everything slowly began to overwhelm the two girls, Cassandra's knees starting to buckle more in brief intervals as she lowered further into the trash pile. Her face turned red with strain as she used the remainder of her leg strength to look towards Emily.

She smiled at her friend, and the debris fell over on top of her as she gave out. Soon after, the weight overwhelmed Emily.

Chapter 18:

"The pattern of the prodigal is: rebellion, ruin, repentance, reconciliation, restoration."

- Edwin Louis Cole

Everything was silent and black for a little while. However, nothing really seemed conclusive with just that. The young woman had felt pulling, stinging, and different rushes of cold from all over the surface of her body. Though the inside had only felt rather empty, and there was no motivation to make even the slightest physical movements.

Different parts of her body felt as though they were being moved by themselves, like she was only a mannequin being manipulated by her master's hands. Still, everything was dark and quiet for her.

A rush of air entered through her lips, and her insides began to feel overwhelmed with building pressure. The sensation forced her to react, coughing and gasping as she grew more and more conscious.

"She's breathing!" a faint voice cried out, among others.

"She's waking up!"

"Watch it, back it up already!"

"Holy..."

Cassandra's eyes flitted open, her breathing starting slow before returning to a normal rhythm. As she kept growing more and more conscious, her body began feeling many different sensations. Her arms and back were aching something fierce, her face and legs felt bruised, and there was an odd filmey flavor lingering in her mouth.

"Easy does it," a close voice murmured.

Cassandra head was laid down and rested on a small pile of clothing articles. Her vision was still fuzzy and unadjusted, though her hearing is beginning to become more comprehensive.

"Cassandra!" another voice called out.

A figure bent down over the woman's body, rather than standing or kneeling beside her. It was smaller than her, though a short blue jacket was worn across its body. Her eyes began to pick up better clarity, and the face of the figure belonged to Emily. Her face was riddled with concern.

"Hey Em," Cassandra whispered, "I think I'm getting old. My back is killing me."

The teen exchanged her worry with humor and relief. A victory cheer was brought forth by the various people standing around them

both. With everything gone so blurry, Cassandra hadn't really noticed any of them.

"What did I miss?" she asked. "Did somebody win a bet? Is it a holiday?"

"Oh, if only," Emily said, "if you're able to sit up, just see for yourself."

Cassandra tried to do so, with her friend giving support for her backside. One side of the crowd cleared a space so she could see. To her left was the building they entered when they came into Norris Rock, except the upper half of the structure was in ruins and wreckage. The doors inside were completely blocked with decor, furniture, and ceiling debris. Cassandra made a troubled expression, as if to say "*oh geez, did I do that?*".

"Don't worry," a deeper voice from behind stated, "it didn't all come down because of just you."

Kneeling beside her was Cole, with bandaged hands. Spots along his arms were swollen and darker compared to the rest of his skin.

"Did I throw a tantrum in my sleep?" Cassandra asked, "you look pretty beat up."

Cole chuckled, "I had to break wood and dig through metal bars to get you two out of there. Though if I look bad, just wait until you see Logan."

"Logan? Where are they?"

"They went down to the river to get some water for you. The guy is working like a horse, none of us could keep up with him."

Emily averted her gaze, not very enthused with the mention.

Another gap began to form between the people in the crowd, and the sound of sloshing and splashing could be made out between the soft chattering. Two large buckets of water were dropped onto the ground, where a peculiar-looking man dropped to his knees in exhaustion. Evidently, it was Logan. A couple of his fingers appeared broken, and wrapped in popsicle stick splints. A large, sharp piece of wood was protruding his shoulder, with dried trails of blood down his arm. The only thing that didn't look all that horrible was his face. Even then, his sweat brought out multiple bruises.

"Welcome to the livin'," he said.

The trio of hijab-wearing women came forth from the crowd, carrying rags and dishcloths to soak in the cold water. One of them began to tend to Logan's wounds, while the other two did so with Cassandra's limbs and upper body. The coldness of the water was

shocking, but after a few moments, she sighed with relief. Many of her ailments involved torn muscles and strained bones, but it was refreshing nonetheless.

Logan looked up towards Cassandra, and then gazed down when she briefly returned the gesture. She made a smug sort of smile, even if he didn't see it.

"I just heard about how hard you were working," Cassandra commented.

"Eh?" said Logan. "Well, what else? Did'ja just expect me to stand around when the entire freakin' building fell on top o' ya?"

"Except it's what I was saying to you before that that makes it significant."

"Oh, sure it does. If you told me it was gonna break apart before it happened, that woulda been significant."

"I don't remember you making the rules, mister."

"I owned this place, lady. Watch what goes out that mouth o' yours."

Cassandra laughed, and then her smile turned sweeter.

"Thank y--"

"Nope," Logan butted in, "don't thank me for nothin'. That's what always comes first before 'I owe ya one' or somethin'. Nah, nah, nah. If this is gonna be a new start for me, I don't need anyone owin' me *nothin'!*"

The two girls looked with surprise towards the young man. Cassandra chuckled, and tried to reach out a hand forward.

"Can I take that statement as a partnership confirmation?" she asked.

Logan grinned, and crawled over to the girl. Even with a broken finger, he took her hand and shook it firmly.

"What's this crap I hear about a partnership?" he asked. "When I'm with *anyone*, even if I'm their leader, there's no partner/comrade/colleague bull. They are my *friends*."

The crowd cheered once again, even the lackeys littered here and there.

"That reminds me," Logan said, "listen up, anybody I gave arms to! From here on out, Cole an' I are not the only ones ya listen to anymore. This chick right here before me is on *my* rank! Her friend right here? *Cole's* rank. If they tell ya to do somethin', you do it, or else I *hurt* you. Ya'll got that?"

The gangmembers were questionable about Logan's decree at first, but they pretty much all concluded with an indifferent nod in agreement.

Emily stared at them all, and facepalmed herself. She couldn't get away from the idiocy.

"With all that said and done," said Cassandra, "what shall we do about your base of operations? Pretty sure neither I or you are in fit condition to walk back to me and Emily's town just yet. It took about an hour and a half for us to get from there to here."

Cole was tempted to crack his knuckles, but was able to restrain himself on time.

"We can last a while out here yet," he assured. "I think the worst that anyone here has gotten is Logan and his broken fingers."

"Even then," Logan said, "I can at least carry some baggage with slings on 'em. But Cole's right, we'll just have everybody stay here 'til we mostly heal over. Lucky for me, neither o' these fingers are my trigger fingers."

"It might be best to scrounge up what we can," Cassandra declared. "It's a long trip, and our own safehouse can't take care of all of us at once."

Everyone around had started murmuring to each other while they departed to look in and around the territory for helpful inventory. Cole and Logan decided to keep close by, while Emily simply stayed with Cassandra and the women trio. She sighed as she let her thoughts wander. More often than not, it was into places she wouldn't be comfortable in expressing.

A couple of days had passed already since arriving in Norris Rock. Cassandra, Logan, and Cole's more manageable injuries had healed over. The young woman couldn't carry a whole lot on the way back to Thomaston, but at the very least, she could walk again. Emily helped with any other items of interest that her friend couldn't lift just yet.

Logan had set up his men with the task of gathering the arms and ammunition. The girls were surprised at just how much more firepower the guy had aside from the ones in the office building. It seems less like a crew of militiamen moving positions, and more like a whole military outpost. Cassandra would occasionally nudge Emily, joking about how she made the right call in coming to this town in the first place. Emily was able to chuckle each time, though she was caught up in her own thoughts.

The crowds of more ordinary people were widespread all over the place. Some had gone to the river to gather more water to bring, others harvested canned goods along with some of the better crops they had growing in the residential district. A few of them had even constructed a shabby yet competent wagon that could be loaded with and carry more supplies.

Cassandra looked around, satisfied and joyful with all the effort everyone was putting in, though something had started to come over her. It felt like something was missing, and she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Several varieties of supplies were being accounted for, so it wasn't anything of that sort.

Emily sat down for a break, and Cassandra happened to be standing nearby. She knelt down next to her, watching the others working.

"Is there anything we're forgetting while we're here?" Cassandra asked.

"Huh?" Emily replied, "not that I know of. We have food, water, stuff to make shelter with, ammo... Nope, sounds like everything."

"No no, I'm sure we're good on that. It just seems as though there's something with the people here, like there's some sort of role going unfulfilled."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. How's everyone's attitudes?"

"No one's complaining about you coming into the picture, if that's what you're worrying yourself about."

"Not me, just in general."

"Eh. Could be worse, but it could be better."

Cassandra rested a palm on her face, thinking deeply. Logan could be seen talking with some of the other people and organizing different tasks to them. Emily quietly sighed, noticeably discontent about something, though Cassandra hadn't been looking at her.

"Emily!" Cole shouted, "can you help us out over here quick?"

Emily stood up and ran over, Cassandra turning her eyes to her from behind. She saw Cole giving inaudible instructions to her, bending over to make eye contact with her. The teen girl's expression hadn't changed much as they spoke, but she eventually nodded to something.

At that point, Cassandra finally realized what she was thinking about in her head. Though as it hit her, she looked rather glum about the sudden epiphany.

"There's quite a lack of children out here," she mumbled to herself.

Within a couple of hours, everything appeared to be as prepared as it was going to get. The light of the sun shone on everyone straight up above, showing that it was midday. With nothing else to stop for or scrounge up, everyone decided to hit the road for Thomaston. When they already neared the bridge, Emily had looked over to her right, unto the wreckage of the tall building set down the river.

A few people stood by the ledge of the bridge, staring at the ruins with her. The several kinds of birds that could be seen that other day were just as active as they were then. A few members of the crowd became teary-eyed with looking across to the site. Emily could only briefly glance at some of them, unsure what exactly was going on. Especially so when a very select few of them muttered thank-you's into the wind.

Cole had come and patted their shoulders, getting them back on track. He noticed Emily, attentive to how confused she was right there. He made a firm sigh before he patted her the same way.

"I know the sight of that building is depressing and all," Emily said, "but I didn't think it would be *that* depressing."

"You just don't know the details," Cole mumbled. "Some of these people were there in that building the day it fell over. A whole gang from the capital city came in and blew up the lower floor, wanting to take over the territory. Even a few bombs were put underneath cars in the parking lot, and a lot of them rolled down into the river down there."

"That's awful."

"Yeah. We're lucky enough that the bastards left eventually. Not a whole lot of people made it through that assault. Those who did still need some saving, even if it's all over and done with. Scars don't go away easy."

"What kind of gang is so stand-offish that they felt it was necessary to hurt so many people?"

Cole squinted and sighed somberly.

"The less you know about those kind of people," he said, "the better. Come on, your friend's probably wondering where you are."

The two of them began walking again, picking up the pace to catch up to the front. It didn't stop Emily from remaining curious about the wreckage in the distance. Even if the attackers weren't mentioned, she also had other questions. Who was there to save the handful of people in the first place?

Within a half hour of moving, Cassandra had noticed up ahead that something was blocking the road. The light of the sun bounced off

harshly against the unknown obstacle, though when she squinted, she could vaguely make out more details.

Logan did the same, while blowing a stream of smoke into the air from a cigarette.

"What's 'at, now?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Cassandra trailed off. "It looks large, whatever it is. We'll check it out once we get over there."

About five minutes of walking later, the big, bright object was revealed to be a semi-truck, hooked up to a trailer. It was tipped over onto its side, though everything done to it was pretty obviously recent. However, there was no sign of its cab driver, or even any footprints showing where they headed off to. The trailer was locked up, so no one was sure if anything was inside it.

"Think we should stick around?" Logan asked.

"I don't think so," Cassandra said, "I can't imagine any current use for it. Let's label it an object of interest, though. If only I had a map on me."

"Got it covered. Anisah, come 'ere a minute!"

Coming forth from the crowd was a woman from the hijab trio. She was evidently the one who wore the dull, yellow skirt.

"Ya think you can keep this sight in the back o' your head?" Logan said.

"I think I already did," Anisah said.

Logan chuckled, before dismissing her.

"Anisah there has a photographic memory," he explained. "She'll know how to get back here if we need to."

"How nice," Cassandra said. "I can hardly even remember what the radio station looks like now."

Chapter 19:

"Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none."

- William Shakespeare

The next hour or so was when everyone had arrived into Thomaston. A few people were noticeably put-off with how much smaller-scale the town was. However, Cassandra could only chuckle at their

comments as she was reminded of how Emily reacted to Norris Rock. At one point, it was addressed to Logan how a small band of wandering gangmembers had come into town for some looting, and he watched over almost every nook and cranny they walked past. Cole was just busy taking in whatever culture had previously thrived here.

Emily was thankful that she could stick with a few of Logan's gunmen that were more intelligent. Her first worry when they left was having to put up with more guys that only thought with their other heads, and perhaps each other's.

Most of the people within the crowd was rather surprised at the lack of garbage laying around compared to their original shelters. With them mumbling about it, it kind of surprised Cassandra, too.

The plan was to set almost everyone up in the residential district as best as they could, even if the majority of the houses were only abandoned. Some of the older folks were elated that they were granted a larger, more private living space. Logan's armed crewmates and gunmen were continuing up closer to the business district, where Sheila's Cafe would be closer in case any of the leading figures needed to be notified of anything. Cassandra expressed concern that the regular civilians wouldn't have that much protection, but Cole had assured her that they emphasized their strength in numbers.

Eventually, the day was coming to a close, with virtually everyone pretty well settled in. The sun was descending past the horizon, finishing off with a flash of green before disappearing completely. Logan and Cole were wiped out from the long day, and they both fell asleep in a booth along the front wall. In spite of the size difference, Cole appeared to be perfectly comfortable. Logan had a light snore, and was positioned close enough to the edge of the seat that falling off would be likely.

Cassandra sat in a different booth on the left-side wall, marking down progress into her black journal. Beside her was a candle, putting just enough light on the subject for her to write.

After answering nature's call, Emily had entered through the front doors. She curled up onto the seat across from Cassandra, shivering from the cool evening air.

"There's blankets behind the bar counter," Cassandra said.

"It's fine," Emily mumbled.

"You've been rather quiet today. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing, I'm just not used to all the new people yet."

Cassandra nodded, but didn't make any kind of eye contact with her friend. She continued silently writing down her new records, which

was rather relaxing for Emily. The handwriting left a lot to be desired, but the pencil lightly scratching on paper was a nice, consistent sound. Emily stared across the diner, onto Logan. She lightly sighed, with a dull ache in her chest.

The darkness and peaceful atmosphere was getting to Cassandra, yawning as she was finishing up with the book. Emily was still kept awake from the outdoor cold, and she started to fidget from not having anything else to do.

"What were you thinking with them?" she asked suddenly.

"Huh?" Cassandra grumbled.

"What did you feel when we first met Logan?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. I was mostly just ready to negotiate, I wasn't anticipating their temper to be so intense."

"I suppose, but then again, I believe there's a difference between a short temper and homicidal tendencies."

Cassandra sternly looked at Emily in concern, straightening her posture as a small surplus of energy had countered her impending sleepiness. She put aside her black journal, and shifted the candle.

"What do you mean with that?" she asked.

Emily shrugged, with an apathetic expression.

"I'll just be straightforward," she said, "I don't trust him. Here we are, with him sleeping in the same building as us, his crewmates are living in our town, and all we have to trust him on is that he's good at blowing stuff up. I really can't understand your entire reasoning, Cassandra."

"Em," said Cassandra, "this was the first time we could gain any appropriate allies. I was prepared for aggression to be present, I was ready for any kind of threat to come out in front of us. If we're to get anywhere close to our goal, we can't just keep tossing people into the dust."

"Sounds appropriate if they try to toss you first."

"They're just scared like we are. It's usually the passing bystanders they don't get fond over because they never had the chance to know them."

"To which that sounds like a prime time to take everything for yourself."

Cassandra sighed, curling her fingers over her lips as she tried to respond.

"How about this," she stated, "how long did it take you to start trusting me?"

"I don't know," Emily muttered, "maybe a couple of weeks?"

"And how much did you mistrust me from the beginning of those two weeks?"

"Well sure, I didn't trust you, but I could already tell you weren't that big a threat."

"What tipped that part off, now?"

"Probably just with starting to..."

Emily trailed off, and made a weirded-out expression as the realization hit her. Cassandra waved her hand and made a soft chuckle to her friend.

"*'Just starting to talk'*, right?" she said. "See, I'm a clear example that trusting others isn't so bad."

Emily remained silent for a moment, before her brows started to lower.

"See," she said, "now who's to say you don't have the opposite problem? It might be the truth that I have issues with really trusting other people, but what about you, Cassie? Don't you ever think you're being *too* trusting?"

Cassandra scooted forward attentively, prepared to keep listening.

"Now here's what I have in my defense," Emily continued.

"Remember when I told you about the feral child I ran into a while ago? You know how they tried to attack me, and I got fairly roughed-up? Well, the first thing I did when they came to me was to offer them some of the snacks I had. Instead of taking them, they leapt out at me. It didn't care who I was, it didn't try to negotiate. During the scrap, they had no intention of making friends, they only took an opportunity to attack me when I was being hospitable. Who's to say everyone you meet is so trustworthy that they won't take advantage of your lowered guard as soon as they join up with you?"

"Emily," Cassandra said softly, yet firmly. "It's getting a little tiresome that I have to keep reminding you of what I stand for."

Emily broke eye contact and laid her head down on her folded arms. She was close to rolling her eyes, but she had enough courtesy to restrain herself.

"I can't lead anyone if no one will trust me," Cassandra resumed.

"How can I expect others to trust me if I don't trust them first? That's one of the things that took down the appeal of Achos' former republic. In the case of Logan, what kind of leader would I be if I told them they weren't allowed to be a man?"

Emily returned eye contact, a little surprised that he was mentioned this time around as opposed to most other discussions they've had on this subject.

"The worst of Achos' leaders never trusted anyone," Cassandra said, "and it only helped them become more selfish and corrupt as the years went by. They didn't care about their own trust in their followers, just in the power they were given. If people are repeatedly told they don't matter, they quickly get tired of it, and they resort to more radical movements to stick it to the ones who put them down.

"Their oppression from the politicians was just as valid as everyone else's. It's the kind of oppression that I can't have happen in this nation again, Emily. It's no ideal that I accept. So no matter how many times Logan has tried to kill me already, I'm only concerned with supporting him and people like him."

"I can only think of good things with that perspective," Emily groaned.

"Well, what am I missing? Tell me, what part of this method is being overlooked, and I'll start to consider your argument. I'll just bring that out, I don't think you're wrong."

"So why is it you're so firm with trusting every single goddamn stranger you meet?"

"Because it goes against what the past leaders did, you know that."

"Well maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have some doubts about people, because so far, all you've ever been is correct about it, and at some time following now that will just end up *hurting you!*"

Emily angrily stood up from the booth, storming back outside from the front doors. Cassandra was prepared to follow her, worried for her, but she held back. She sighed solemnly to herself, before standing up to grab a blanket from behind the bar counter. She covered herself up as she laid down in the booth, and blew out her candle before trying to go to sleep.

Chapter 20:

"The first recipe for happiness is: avoid too lengthy meditation on the past."

- Andre Maurois

Emily stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, down the hill from Sheila's. She ran her fingers through her white, curly hair and tugged at

her scalp in frustration. Having to hear Cassandra go through what was overall the same message over and over, she couldn't bear it this time. The air was cooler now that the sky was becoming black with night, but her irritation made her body warm up and become tolerant of it. Emily growled and laid down across the concrete to look straight up. She got a headache with pondering over the past conversation, so she was thankful the moon wasn't out yet.

The wind blew across Emily's body as she stared up at the sky. She couldn't remember most of the constellations too well, so she had to make up some of her own. She spotted a shooting star near the Leo pattern, or "Corpsebeak the Thunderbird", as she liked to call it. It was a decent sighting, but she was hardly in the mood to pay any mind to mother nature's wonders. She briefly thought about how she seldom had the chance to sit down with herself, and meditate with whatever's on her mind. The encounter with the feral child she didn't count, though.

Emily turned over onto her side, and curled up. She thought back to the wild child again, her mind scanning the memory over for more details that might be helpful. From the little scars and bruises, the location, and especially the kid's behavior, she couldn't quite see anything that was flying below her radar. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fist with the idea. How could Cassandra think to disprove the encounter as anything genuine in the slightest? Even thinking about it was keeping Emily from calming down.

Though something did cross her mind with that question.

Even if the small child had attacked first, it wasn't the very first thing it did when it came up behind Emily. The first thing it did was inspect the bag of chips that she threw onto the ground. Hell, it didn't even look at her at the time. It was only when Emily tried getting a little closer that it reacted aggressively.

It was an error of communication.

She violently shook her head in disbelief, and hit the rough ground with her fist repeatedly. It all turned around against her, like pretty much every other time. She gritted her teeth and growled in aggravation. Was she just stuck in a trap, and that's how it was going to stay? It wouldn't be hard for Cassandra to do, considering what she's capable of.

The thought alerted Emily enough to sit back up and even gasp. She may have been having doubts of everything going on so far, but it's the first time she ever went *that* far with any of them.

Her skin crawled, though only half of it was because of the cool air now. A disturbed, more excited breathing pattern came over Emily.

The two girls have known each other and been good friends for roughly about a year and a half. She took a minute to recall whatever she could about their first meeting. From there, she would try and think back through whatever times that Cassandra used her abilities. She had the idea to simply check through the black journal, but she was still too upset to go back inside the diner.

The first time the girls had met, it was during a rainstorm. For their region, that sort of weather was pretty uncommon, which only solidified the memory more:

At the time, Emily could only make use of a few bath towels she found to set up over some tin shafts in a small shelter. It wasn't too effective, and she hadn't had any other items to warm herself up with besides the clothes on her body. It was during the night too, which ended up only adding to the misery.

Before she could try and fall asleep the best she could, a rapid succession of footsteps approached, before a figure just hurried into whatever space there was left in the makeshift shelter.

Emily had shuffled away from them quickly, startling the stranger. It was a young woman, just barely older-looking enough for it to be noticeable. She immediately apologized, not realizing anyone was in here. Emily was rather eager to shoo her out, but the downpour that completely soaked them had made the appeal to empathize more with the woman.

They introduced themselves as Cassandra Streit, and she remembered not responding right after out of caution. In fact, within that same minute, they threatened to kick them out of the shelter as soon as the rain stopped. In that moment, the cold water that the towels were collecting began to drip onto Emily's ankle. Cassandra said she could help with that, and suddenly the water evened out across the towel. She was rather freaked out, though only her widened eyes had indicated that.

In hindsight, Emily supposed that it was better to learn about her friend's powers right away than later.

She remembered asking Cassandra about her supplies, or more specifically, the lack thereof. There was less reason to distrust the woman now as much as just pity on her. Cassandra admitted that she wasn't particularly one to know much about scavenging. Emily had something else to be surprised about now. No person she ever knew had lacked what seemed like basic survival knowledge.

Emily remembered quizzing her on different things to look for, most of which the woman honestly did not know anything about. The only parts she did know was getting bottles and such for gathering water

wherever it could be found. It was a wonder that this lady has lasted up 'til then in such a brutal environment.

Pitying her even more, the teen decided to educate Cassandra before completely letting them go off on their own. In those times, the woman would also ramble about her different stories, and her ultimate goal. Since then, it seemed to blossom into the dynamic they have today.

One of the most important memories she had at the time was during their first official rummaging. Emily had been keeping a close watch on Cassandra's use of her powers, and often thinking she used them rather clumsily, and for seemingly mundane reasons. Stuff like lighting different useless objects on fire through friction, punching holes in buildings, and amplifying her voice whenever she shouted into the wind. Emily knew she could be using them in much more efficient and practical ways. It was troublesome though, since Cassandra had a tendency to be rather forgetful.

In testament to the past couple of weeks they had been learning to trust and enjoy each other's company, she had given her new friend something to keep her abilities relatively in check. In their rummaging, she had come across a reasonably thick, totally blank journal with a black cover. Since that day, Cassandra hadn't gone anywhere without it. It's fair to say, that's what confirmed their friendship.

Browsing through these memories, Emily had begun to tear up. Sure, they had a hefty amount of differences, and occasionally, their perspectives clashed, but she hadn't known or trusted anyone like Cassandra ever since both of her parents died.

She pressed her palms against her face, trying to tough out the emotions enough to stop any more welling up in her eyes. No crying is allowed, not when water is as invaluable as it is out here. Not only that, but the intrusive thoughts were scratching at her mind too much to know for certain whether or not she should feel bad or not.

Come to think of it, these worries and doubts hadn't come up until just a few days ago. It was when Cassandra made it known that she wasn't using her powers for just anything anymore that these concerns started becoming an issue to begin with.

Anger had begun to subside in Emily now, but the remaining space was being taken up with different feelings that felt just as bad, if not worse. There was fear, doubt, apprehension, panic, denial, and even a little bit of grief. Emily fell back over onto the cold pavement of the sidewalk, covering her face with her hands. She curled into a ball, wrapped in so much uncertainty to not know what to do to deal with this.

She was scared to go to Cassandra, and she didn't trust Logan or Cole enough to confide in them.

In a stressed fit, she stood up and bolted down the sidewalk. She ran towards the residential district, but had no intention to stop there. No comfort would be found inside Thomaston. Various residents that remained outdoors watched the teen girl sprinting down the street, clueless with whatever was going on with her. A few looked behind her to see if she was being chased, but there was no one.

Emily huffed as her legs began to feel strained with her energy depleting, but she kept going. She didn't care how much the wind against her was bitter cold, she kept going. She ran up to the storage sheds, but continued running. When less and less sign of civilization was visible, she still continued running forward.

The girl must have ran about two miles, before eventually slowing down and collapsing onto the ground, far enough out of town to feel safe. Her arms were a little scratched from the hard asphalt, but like many things going on around her, she didn't give a single damn to any of it.

When she stood up again, she looked back to the town, her eyes squinting sternly as she tried to catch her breath. At that point, she kept moving, only in a slow walk. Emily had run away from Thomaston, but if she put it to words, she likely would've put it as an escape.

Part Two

Chapter 21:

"When was the last time you heard news accounts of a boatload of American refugees arrive on the shores of another country?"

- Marco Rubio

Morning had come again, and the sunlight was brightly beaming through the diner windows. The way Logan was positioned in his booth, it was relentlessly shining directly into his closed eyes; the table wasn't

even effective in blocking it unless he slid off the seat and slept under it. Cole was given relief from it, his face blocked under the shade of the backrest of his own seat.

Cassandra was evidently more welcoming of the sunshine gleaming across her face, as she felt rather good once opening her eyes to the blessing of daylight. At least, as good as she could, in regards to the verbal scuffle she and Emily had gotten involved with.

She turned to the seat across from her, seeing that Emily had not yet returned. A solemn sigh slipped out from her nostrils. She thought that one of the first things she has to do today was find her and make sure she was doing alright. If she was in the right mood, maybe they could try and patch up the dispute altogether.

Logan was visibly irritated with the bright light as he sat up and stretched. As he squinted one of his eyes open, he gave a tired wave to Cassandra from across the room. She smiled and returned the gesture before standing up and scanning through the booths, in case Emily happened to have come back and was out of view. No such luck.

"There wouldn't happen to be any breakfast, is there?" Logan asked.

"That's a negative," Cassandra replied, "it might be a diner, but it's not much different than any other place we'd be taking refuge in."

"Only you can actually cook with a stove and not a bonfire. Much rather say this is home sweet home over an office buildin' doomed to fallin' apart."

"Glad you're optimistic. Say, you wouldn't have happened to see Emily come back at any point last night?"

"Nope. If rocks could sleep, I would'a been a rock last night."

"I see. Keep an eye out for her for me, please."

Cole shuffled around in his seat as he began to wake up behind the other two. Logan wiped off his glasses from the dust and grimy stuff spread across the lenses. He followed with brushing off his shoulders, even though his shaved head was mostly a prevention of dandruff flaking on them.

"How about you?" Cassandra asked Cole, "did you ever see Emily last night?"

"No ma'am," he grumbled.

"Alright. Tell me if you ever run into her."

Cassandra nibbled her finger with her lips, wondering where she should look for the girl first. There weren't many options or locations that grabbed Emily's interest initially, plus the fact they hadn't been settled in Thomaston for very long. Probably a week and a half, at most.

The front doors quickly swung wide open as Cassandra was prepared to leave for her search. Inside came one of the women in the hijab trio. She was recognized as the same one who had Cassandra at gunpoint back at Norris Rock, given away from her dark blue headwear.

"Logan, Cole, sirs!" she exclaimed.

"What is it, Fahima?" Cole answered with a jolt.

"There's a group of trespassers en route from the eastern road."

"How many are there?"

"I estimate about twenty."

Cole and Logan jump out of their seats, immediately answering the call to action without another word. Cassandra was left speechless, and quickly decided to put the search for Emily on the backburner as she lagged behind them. As she departed from the diner, she could make out Cole and Fahima drawing out handguns as they both gathered up some of the gangmembers from in town to accompany them. Logan wasn't hurrying forth quite like either of them, instead walking straight for where the strangers were sighted.

Cassandra's decision was quickly made to follow Logan, though it was rendered rather pointless to have to decide, as the others were already prepared and catching up quickly to him. She picked up her pace down the road as they all stood in place to form a blockade. The crowd could be seen further ahead, evidently moving in quite a hurry.

At the front of the approaching group was a middle-aged black man in a heavy white jacket, followed by several kinds of other men and women. Some of the female company were clearly distinguishable as nuns.

"Hello to all of you," the older man spoke, a little winded.

"Who the hell are you and what do you want?" Cole snarled.

A tap on his shoulder briefly interrupted his focus. He turned to see Cassandra standing behind him, with a vaguely scolding face.

"Don't do that," she said. "You're plenty opposing and scary on your own, big guy. Leave the threats at the back door, if you'd kindly."

Cole looked at Logan, who shrugged as soon as the young woman came into the picture. She approached the man in front of them, and shook his hand.

"So sorry for the shaky introductions," she said. "I've yet to talk to these two about stranger danger. I'm Cassandra, I'm in charge of mostly everything around here. How can we help you folks?"

"It's no problem," the man assured, "we understand their caution. My name is Daniel, and all of us are kind of in a sticky situation here."

We're just a group of church people looking for a place to lay low for a while."

Logan and Cole looked to each other, with an equal amount of doubt in these strangers that came by so suddenly.

"Lay low?" Cassandra asked. "What would church people be in danger of?"

"Oh, if you only knew," Daniel sighed. "A bunch of nasty gangmembers have been chasing us around the region up, down, left, and right. We meant no harm in passing by their territory, but evidently, their fervently against our beliefs. They get livid with just the mention of God."

"I'm sure. Most of the gangs around Achos are anti-religious."

"Would you happen to have any space for us, in your town?"

"Oh, absolutely. Cole, would you be willing to find a place for these folks to hang out for a while?"

Cole made a slight grimace, but nodded in compliance. Cassandra made a warm smile to the church people, and several of them stated many thank-you's and bless-you's. Logan had a visibly irritated expression on his face, but no one really noticed. He jogged back towards Daniel, making an effort to keep up with his allies.

"Hey, old man," he said.

"Yes, ma'am?" Daniel responded.

Logan briefly growled, but shook it off.

"These guys, these gangmembers, would ya happen to know what they call 'emselfs? What's their name?"

"Ooh, lord. I wouldn't be looking for trouble with them if I were in your shoes."

"Just tell me already."

"I believe they made themselves out as the 'Phantom Mambas'."

Logan exchanged another look to Cole as he overheard it, both of them noticeably concerned. He fast-walked further up to Cassandra, his handgun still drawn.

"Cassandra," he stifled, "did'ja just catch that?"

"Catch what?" she replied.

"We need to get these guys outta Thomaston as soon as freakin' possible."

"What's got you concerned?"

"These guys are *Phantom Mamba* targets, Cass!"

Cassandra thought for a moment as they continued walking, but she couldn't draw any sort of basis on the name.

"Who are the Phantom Mambas?"

"*Who're they?*" Logan said. "Are you serious? They were the radicals that single-handedly--"

"Look, Logan," Cassandra interrupted, "no matter dangerous they might be, I'm sure we'll be handle them. Just remember who you're talking to, after all."

"I'm fuckin' shocked you don't know about 'em *already!*"

"Hey, now. I might know a thing or two about Achos' history, but I'm still allowed to miss a few details, aren't I?"

"A few details, eh? Fine, keep yourself in danger by ignorin' our worries about 'em if ya want, but I'm puttin' all o' my guys on high alert as long as these people are stayin' here. I suggest ya keep watch over the east windows if I was you."

Cassandra gave a smile of assurance to the young man, but he didn't buy it. He briefly ran to the other side to be beside Cole. Neither of them talked for the rest of the way back to town.

The heat of the sun was beginning to intensify within the expected 10-11 AM time interval. Everyone browsed through various buildings in the business district to see what might be appropriate for their visitors. Cassandra thought to hide them out in the building of a former bank, since it wouldn't be likely that anyone would have interest in breaking into it. Then again, the four guys from a long while ago weren't bright enough to lose interest in money, so this fact might not be too effective.

Logan did happen to like the idea, though. He ordered some of his men to keep guard over the group from within. That way, they won't be defenseless in case they're found out.

"Bless all of you," Daniel said. "We won't forget what you're doing for us."

"It's no trouble. We won't be able to provide every essential, but it's not in my better judgement to not give sanctuary to anyone when I have the power to do so."

"If only others were so kind-hearted in this harsh carcass of a country."

"I'm rather curious, though. What are you planning with yourselves, traveling altogether across the land like this? I might be overthinking it, but a group of religious folks simply trying to survive doesn't really match the fact of journeying around without a place to call home."

"It was mostly being driven out by the Phantom Mambas all the time, but you're not totally off. We're just hoping to find a place that's safe to reestablish our church without the fear of getting killed off."

"I can see how that would factor into a perilous undertaking, yes. I'll have to make that extra clear when I get up to the podium, then."

"Podium? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I'm planning to gain a following, and help Achos be restored to how it was before all the corruption."

Daniel made an unexpectedly anxious face, appearing kind of adverse to the idea.

"That's quite ambitious of you," he muttered, "but I wouldn't get my hopes up. Those violent gangs are ruthless in new leader types, even more than those who follow God."

"There's no need to worry, I promise," said Cassandra.

"Well, at least we know one person that will be fighting for bringing God back to the nation. It's probably the best thing it needs, now more than ever."

"In a manner of speaking, I guess so."

The church group began to settle into the empty bank, and everyone seemed to be in relatively high spirits with receiving help. From the window, they could be seen making a prayer and holding each other's hand. Cassandra found the activity uplifting, but she quickly steered her focus back to her search for Emily. While she was outside, she decided to make way towards the storage sheds.

She hoped that her friend was at least safe, wherever she was.

Chapter 22:

"Terrorism, ladies and gentlemen, in my eyes I have a very, very, very simple explanation. Gangs of criminals, killers, used unfortunately by certain governments in the past for political purposes, who are on their own now as gangs."

- Hamid Karzai

From her location, it seemed like Emily was in the middle of nowhere. The land was mostly flat, and the sun irritated her with its heat coming above and radiating from the ground. All she had for guidance was the asphalt road she had been walking since last night. She didn't have much energy to express anger anymore, as she only had a headache with how long she had her brows furrowed.

She was becoming too tired to really feel anything right now, though her legs kept bringing her further and further away from Cassandra and company. If this was going to be a longer-term arrangement, she might force herself to turn back and resupply herself without anyone's knowledge.

Emily took a moment to sit down and rest her legs, not caring if the hot pavement was really uncomfortable for her rear. It's not like anywhere else is much of a better spot, anyhow.

There was a light breeze, and no clouds could be seen in the sky, as per usual. A couple of lizards scurried across the road, and she briefly wondered about how good they'd taste if put to a flame. She felt guilty for forgetting to grab any water, even. The way to Norris Rock wasn't the same route she had taken, and so she didn't expect to come across the river. Too bad, as shade was a luxury out here.

Emily put up her hood, and simply sat in silence. Her mind was kept blank as she just stared at the flat, empty wilderness ahead of her and around her.

How utterly pathetic.

She spent about ten minutes staying in that spot. The calluses on the soles of her feet had begun to slightly peel from all the previous walking. Her whole body was sunburnt, and the aroma of body odor started to attract different bugs. If only she had thought this through beforehand.

A faint rumble could be heard in the distance. Emily turned her head towards the road, and saw black dots far along the horizon. The heat waves that radiated from the ground prevented any possible features to be discernable. She stood up, putting her hand over her eyes to block out the sun. There was the thought that it was just a mirage, but the rumbling that came from the same direction hasn't stopped.

In a few minutes, the dots began getting larger, and clearer to see. Emily tensed her muscles in preparation. Someone was coming.

The rumbles grew louder and louder as time passed, and the dots grew closer and closer until they were not dots anymore, but blurry figures. There were three of them, and they all appeared to be riding rather strange-looking vehicles. It's nothing that Emily's ever seen or heard of, at least.

In the next few minutes, the pitch of the rumbling began to lower, and the figures approached from the span of long walking distance to just a few steps away. They all stopped with their two-wheeled vehicles, followed with the sound of deactivation. Each figure had what appeared to be full-automatic rifles wrapped around their bodies with a sling. The

one in front took off a helmet, and the face of a man looked directly at Emily.

"Howdy," the stranger said.

Emily remained silent, stuck trying to figure out exactly what they were riding.

"You look awful young to be out here by yourself," said the man.

"I can take care of myself," Emily responded.

"Are you sure? You're getting pretty red there, miss."

"I'm trying to teach my body to tan. See ya."

Emily was about to resume her walk down the road, though one of the other men grabbed her shoulder and kept her in place.

"Now that's not very nice," he said. "I don't know how far a lippy little girl is gonna be able to go."

"It's gotten me around," said Emily.

"Yeah, it might just put you in the ground, too. Not everyone can appreciate a bad attitude like the rest of us can, you know?"

"So you all have bad attitudes. See ya."

Emily tried to push off the guy's hand on her shoulder, but the one in front had walked over and placed his own on the other shoulder. She furrowed her brows at them, complete with a little irritated pout.

"Missy, it's not safe all the way out here," the guy said. "What we're trying to say is that, we're willing to help you out. Outcasts have to look out for each other."

"Then you're not really outcasts," Emily mumbled.

"Okay, okay. Look here, we're offering you a ride with us, to our little family, and you're free to refuse. But while we're out here, I have to ask just one question."

"What?"

"Would you have happened to see a group of religious nuts while you've been walking?"

"I'm sure you'd find some if you went in just about any direction."

A third man eyeballed Emily from his own vehicle, but didn't say anything. The other two made a soft, nervous chuckle from his reaction.

"Alright," one of them said, "if you change your mind, we'll just be checking up on a town we know is up ahead. Speaking of, you should probably head there anyway. Find some shelter, take care of yourself. It'd be a tragedy for someone as cute as you to end up dried and dead on the side of the road."

Emily's face scrunched up in more irritation, with her cheeks involuntarily turning more red than they were already. The thought of being regarded as cute was in her list of personal disgusts. The men took

their hands off and proceeded to put their helmets back on. The third one behind them looked kind of pissed about something, but it was never addressed. The loud rumbling of the engines starting had startled Emily, and in just a few moments, they drove away.

The back of their jackets had a large insignia with a blue ghostly skull wrapped around a red and black snake in a double helix. Emily briefly thought it looked pretty cool, as far as gang logos go. She watched the three men taking off down the road, and as they progressed further, she flipped them the bird behind their backs.

The teen had taken a few steps back in her own direction, but then halted.

One of the men had mentioned a town that they knew was along this road. Looking back again, Emily hadn't seen any other roads that split from the one she was on. If they were driving the opposite direction, then...

She caught herself contemplating whether to go back. She was already quite a few miles away from Thomaston, there would be no way to make it back there on foot before the three men did.

Then again, now Logan, Cole, and all those other buffoons are settled in town. If things get dirty, there's plenty of arms and plenty to arm. No use worrying about anyone's safety if that's what might happen.

Emily wondered about Cassandra, though. She was definitely the type to use diplomacy before violence. Hell, she didn't even lay a finger on Logan a few days ago. Emily reminded herself of the argument she had with her, thinking back on what might happen in her absence.

That's when the girl feared for everyone there. Cassandra wouldn't want Logan, Cole, and the other gangmembers to open fire unless absolutely, doubtlessly necessary. Violence would be avoided at whatever cost while she's in charge of everyone. Plus, it was pretty much certain that neither Cassandra nor herself knew what these new strangers were capable of.

She pivoted her foot into the ground, and burst into a sprint for the other way. There was logically no chance that she would get back to Thomaston in time, but she couldn't allow that to hold her back, not when there's a fair chance if she hurries. She couldn't stop for almost anything now, and her frustrations were no longer a priority. She can't risk her best friend getting everyone and herself in danger.

Chapter 23:

"Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate, and doubt, to offer a solution everybody can understand."

- Colin Powell

Logan stood in front of an alleyway, killing time by keeping a close watch on the people inside the bank across the street. The face he had was completely devoid of humor. He had tasked several of his men to be on high alert, as he had no intention to allow an easy pass for anyone else that might show up today. Cassandra might have insisted that he relax, but her ignorance was crystal-clear to him.

"Maybe it'd be better to keep watch of the roads," a deep voice said.

Cole came by and sat on a crate next to Logan. He brought two bottles of cleaned water for the both of them.

"I'm startin' to think I should just shoo 'em out," Logan muttered. "If anyone asks, I could just say they didn't feel like bein' a burden."

"Except they needed some time to settle in that building. It'd at least take just as long to pack them up and a little longer to have them leave without a trace. I think we'll just have to deal with them until the storm comes by."

"Storm, yeah. They're all a buncha freakin' lightning rods."

"You sure it's just the Mambas you're worrying yourself over, pal?"

"The hell do you think?"

Logan took a jerky swig from his bottle of water, a little bit dribbling off of his chin. He smacked his lips, but only felt a little refreshed. The folks gathered inside the bank were caught up in different conversations with each other, and Logan figured he could pretty closely predict what at least some of them were talking about.

Cole poured a bit of his water into his hand, rubbing his face and bald head to give some relief from the day's heat. His eyes wandered around the town more, just observing whatever establishments were around them.

"Bah, who'm I kidding?" Logan blurted out. "I can hardly stand the sight o' those people. Sure, they all seem friendly now, but just wait 'til someone like me tries to tell 'em my story, huh? They're not worth our time if they don't consider what time's already given people like us."

"I don't know yet," Cole said. "I can't really trust them either, but they're hardly the ones bringing the threat to Achos. I might just pop in at some point to get their side of the picture."

"Goddamn it, Cole," Logan sighed. "Do ya not remember how much of a part they played in this whole mess? You're talkin' about gettin' their side o' the picture, but you're not really lookin' at the *big* picture!"

"Are you?"

"How could I say I'm not? C'mon, you know what a lotta these people're like. So much o' that kindness is just a freakin' mask, as soon as you don't agree with somethin', they turn into a buncha savage jackals."

"It's not that I don't see where you're coming from, Logan. I understand perfectly. It's only when you try to carry out your message that you start growling, too."

Logan swallowed a bit of water down the wrong pipe. After a brief coughing fit, he laid a puzzled stare at his comrade.

"You have a temper," Cole continued, "and you know it. If I didn't know you, I'd first pick you as a more dangerous party."

"Okay big guy," Logan muttered, "I don't know what's up wit'chu, but a long time ago, I swear I could've heard ya say a buncha times that my anger was well managed."

"That's when we had more people after us."

"And ya think that whole thing's over? As long as folks like *those* control freaks are still around, I'm not buyin' it. I've had to watch my back so many times that I could find a hobby as a contortionist, and that's when I'm relaxed. From all over the country, wherever could ya find *any* example of these people bein' a good thing?"

"Well, you never asked Cassandra about it."

Logan stood motionless for a second, still wearing his confused expression. He shook it off and crossed his arms, without another word. Cole looked right at him, with a slightly warmer disposition than usual.

"Either way," he said, "as much as I get where you're coming from, I also know that your bigger plan for everyone is equality. Hasn't Cassandra tipped you off that she is after the same thing? Just think back to when she came by Norris Rock."

The young man sighed, brushing his shaved head with his hand. He relaxed more in a sense of giving up as opposed to comfort. He slammed the rest of his water, tossing the bottle playfully. He knew he wouldn't stand a chance against that argument now. On the plus side, it would mean at least a little anger management from both new and old friends.

It just sounds ridiculous that it took bringing him to blowing up and destroying a building before any progress could be made.

A few of the lackeys across the street were chuckling to each other, and with Logan watching them from afar, it at least managed to appear endearing enough to ease his suspicions a little. Cole simply continued scanning through the buildings and roads from all around. He tried to listen carefully, as he could swear he heard a rumble somewhere.

"Logan, shir!" a lighter voice asserted.

From behind the alleyway was the third woman in the hijab trio, panting for a moment before standing back upright with a determined expression.

"We've caught shight of more incoming treshpasshers, shir!"

"From which direction?" Logan asked firmly.

"They're all coming from the eashtern road, jusht like earlier today."

"Thank you, Tala. Arrange the rest o' my boys around the plaza. Cole?"

"Hm?" said Cole.

"Run around town and find Cassandra. Make sure she's alright an' protected. I'm gettin' some of the bigger toys out."

Logan paused for a moment, before looking sternly back to Cole.

"You got as much of a bad feelin' as I do?" he asked.

"That's not important," Cole mumbled. "But, I'd be lying if I said no."

Chapter 24:

"Sadism is not an infectious disease that strikes a person all of a sudden. It has a long prehistory in childhood and always originates in the desperate fantasies of a child who is searching for a way out of a hopeless situation."

- Alice Miller

Many of Logan's gunmen were scrambling around for arms and good positions. First thing's first, they had to block off the path to the bank. Most of them wanted to stay far enough behind that any action would mean they're not the first ones to get shot, though various commands from the hijab trio had forced handfuls of them to take up a front line succeeding the ones behind them. The three women were

Logan's personal scouts, and pretty much outrank anyone that isn't Logan or Cole; plus Cassandra and Emily by extension.

Though none of them were especially looked up to by most of the men.

The front doors and windows of the bank were pressed from the outside by the crowds of armed gangmembers. The people inside fled to the other rooms in the back of the building. If one had paid attention to them, they would notice how all of them made the effort to include every single person in whatever space they could manage.

Logan grabbed two handguns, strapped on a belt of pockets for his ammo, and carried a 12-gauge pump shotgun with one arm along with cans of tear gas in the other. Everybody around town was too frantic for it to be heard, but he knew that faint rumbling would be getting louder in just a few minutes.

Cole found Cassandra still searching through the storage sheds that have been occupied. Despite the alert, she insisted on continuing her search and that Cole relayed whatever orders she wanted everyone to follow. Cole ended up grabbing her from off of her feet and carried her back into the business district. Cassandra hated it, but she had to admit, it felt nice to give her legs a break like this.

Though the worst news was that Emily was still nowhere to be found. She still remained optimistic, since the storage sheds weren't the only places to look, but the ache of guilt and worry began to build inside her chest.

After organizing everyone into their positions, the scouts went to situate themselves inside a building from the other block. Since they entered the same building as Logan, he tossed each one of them a rifle with enough range to fire onto any threat from above. With that done and out of the way, Logan left to join his men.

Everyone was crowded along the main street, though the entire place was silent. The scouts were in position, the gunmen were in position, Logan was here, and Cole carried Cassandra over just in time.

"My, my," she gasped, "what in Achos' good name is making this entire setup necessary?"

"You need to hide somewhere, Cassandra," Cole said. "We've trusted you with the folks in the bank, but now you need to trust us."

"Shouldn't I just stay close, just to be sure?"

"Woman, you have no idea what's coming right for us."

"Does that make a good excuse to not try and see if they'll negotiate?"

"There is no excuse good enough for you to associate with these maniacs, now get out of here and don't come out until *we say so!*"

Cassandra huffed in offense, and walked away into the crowd of armed men. When she got deep enough in for Cole to look away, she bent her knees down and started to worm her way back towards the front. The men she had to nudge against almost blew her cover, but Logan strictly commanded them to keep their attention towards the road.

Far away along the horizon, black dots were visible at the point where the line and the road meet. The distant rumbles slowly grew clearer, louder, and more imposing. Cassandra shivered as she heard the sound. In spite of her knowledge of transportation and machinery in Achos, this was completely foreign. She had no idea what to make of it, what to attribute it to.

Eventually, the dots came closer and were shaped into figures as they approached the town. The deep rumbling was now made obvious to everyone, and it all began to lower in pitch as the vehicles gradually came to a stop in the main intersection. Logan motioned for everyone to be at a ready position.

The first of the three strangers to dismount their ride was the man from behind. He took off his helmet, revealing a very pale, unnaturally-aged man. There were clear signs that he's had a history with some kind of drug, most likely meth. The other two followed suit, and looked much better in comparison. The pale one began walking up towards the front of the armed crowd, a sick smile growing on his face.

"Well," he said, "look at the eyesore we've run into here."

Cassandra emerged swiftly from behind the gunmen, approaching the clammy stranger. His smug look dropped into contempt as she appeared taller than him.

"Greetings," she said. "What brings you into our neck of the woods?"

Logan and Cole look at each other and towards Cassandra, put off with the fact she couldn't leave them alone. Regardless, they knew it was hopeless to speak up now that she's out in the open.

"We're looking for a bunch of troublemakers," the man said. "From what we can all see here, I'm willing to bet they're here. A group of about twenty-or-so religious nutcases?"

"Well, um," said Cassandra, "in our town, we'll gladly welcome any people looking for a place to--"

The shorter man gave a hard slap across the young woman's face. She was knocked off-balance, and a few of the gunmen from behind had

to catch her. Cassandra was completely dazed as her reddened cheek stung sharply.

"You *sonuva bitch*," Logan growled, raising a handgun barrel towards the man.

"Oh dear," the small man snickered, "did I just strike someone important? They looked so pristine and perfect, I just couldn't stand it. But I'm sure she'll be fine, even if I slapped her a few more times."

He turned to face Logan, a row of yellow teeth lined up across his smile.

"How nice that we've managed to cross each other's paths. I'm sure the big boss would love to hear about the tales I'd weave from out of here."

Logan's finger wrapped oh-so-slightly tighter onto the trigger.

"Settle down there, Logan," Cassandra said from behind.

She stood back upright, and took a deep breath.

"I told ya it was a mistake to bring those people in," Logan grumbled.

"Nothing's conclusive yet," Cassandra snapped. "So, my good sir. What is so important about this group of theists that you've had to drive all this way for them?"

"Oh, but don't you know already?" the man said. "We're the kind of people that they so thoroughly pressed under their thumbs whenever they could. They were rampant when the leaders of the country were still important. Now that we're calling the shots out here, there's no room for their kind of folks. They need to be driven to the ground, so they don't bring us to ruin again. Oh, how much bias runs in their veins. How much ignorance, self-righteousness, and hunger for power flows through their bones."

Logan looked downward, as though reconsidering something. Some of the men lined up in the streets looked to each other, acknowledging the words spoken.

"What's gone on in the past is done," Cassandra objected.

"Everyone has a right to live, especially in the wasteland we all live in now. In spite of the injustices, in spite of the prejudice, in spite of the cruelty, and in spite of the corruption, people are always still people in the end. Those who work hard to keep themselves and others happy and healthy are to be renowned, not spat upon. Beliefs do not define them, and neither do actions that these people specifically are not responsible for. With that said, I suggest you return from wherever you came from. Good day to the three of you."

One of the two men that drove along was visibly taken aback with her speech and assertiveness. The other smacked him on the shoulder.

"Oh dear," the pale man sighed, "you are absolutely right. I cannot imagine what sort of horrors that *we* must have caused *them*. Looks like we no longer have any place here. Let's head out, boys. *We* don't want to be of any *trouble*."

The short, wrinkled man twirled his finger around as he turned back to his ride. The other two put their helmets back on, and mounted their two-wheeled vehicles. As the last one sat upon the cushion, he winked and blew a kiss towards Logan.

Logan raised his handgun back towards the guy again.

The machines began to roar to life as they all activated the unfamiliar mechanism with a kick of their boots. They circled back around to the road they came in from, and drove away. Cassandra had a look of surprise as she brushed herself off. It quickly turned into a warm smile.

"That was easy," she chuckled.

Logan gestured all the gangmembers once again for the ready position.

"It ain't over yet," he mumbled.

"But," Cassandra said, "but they just left. They accepted my speech and just left. What's the issue with this result?"

"The fact that'cher cheek's all red means you don't know the half of it, girl."

She subconsciously rubbed her cheek before looking towards the road in confusion.

From up on a higher level, the scouts kept a close watch of the departees, and after a few moments, the dark spots along the road began to make a wide turn in the distance. Fahima flinched and cupped the sides of her mouth.

"They're coming back!" she shouted.

Cassandra couldn't keep up with the moment, while Logan appeared to know exactly what was going to happen. He ordered everyone at the front of the crowd to aim their firearms towards the road. The rumbles fluctuated in intensity as they grew slowly louder again. As the sound was overwhelming the entire area, Logan loudly counted down from three as he activated and threw a couple tear gas canisters.

As the glimmer of their vehicles came into view, he threw his free hand down towards the ground.

"*Fire!*" he shouted.

The three mounted men quickly drove by the crowd from the road, firing several full-automatic rounds towards the mass of armed men.

Four of them were immediately killed with four others wounded. None of their own shots have managed to land a hit on any of the three guys or their mounts. If the tear gas affected any of them, it wasn't seen.

Cassandra ducked with terror and tried to work her way towards the buildings along the right side of the street. Logan continued throwing down more tear gas, trying to build up an entire wall with it.

From up above, the scouts tried sniping at the enemy. The fact that few situations have called for snipers to be present has made them generally inexperienced in the field, and so they consistently miss.

The trio riding along began to turn again, except they didn't turn completely back as anticipated. They drove through a street connected to the main road, and were going back towards the rear of the crowd. Most of the gunmen were positioned towards the main road, meaning that their rear was a weak spot. Logan cursed loudly, while Cole prepared to throw a frag grenade. He struggled a little getting through the men, but he decided to screw it and pull the pin.

He tossed the explosive towards the other end of the street. The three riders came into view and began to fire. Many of the men were shot successfully, but Cole was fortunately safe from one of them in front of himself. Nevertheless, his face twisted into an angered expression.

The grenade exploded just in time for the rider at the rear to be blown off his mount. The vehicle rolled and landed over him as he laid motionless.

Cassandra wasn't sure what to do in her position. She was stuck between loads of gunmen right in front of her and a building to her back, keeping visibility low. She wasn't armed, or even prepared for a gunfight. Using her powers was completely out of the question.

However, she was not in a line of offense. If numbers stray too low, and the intruders get through into the bank, she could be there to protect the people inside. Just as the idea was fully received, a stray bullet bounced off the wall of the building, just above Cassandra's head. She froze with horror in that moment, but she slapped herself back to reality. It helped more than she slapped the red cheek, but it wasn't pleasant at all.

From the sidelines of the fight, she took her time to weasel through into the bank.

Despite being shorter than most of his men, Logan plowed through the group, anxious to get to the other side of the road. He lobbed the last two canisters of tear gas out onto the path. It was guaranteed that at least one of them was going to bail from their ride.

The rumbles grew louder with another approach back to the main road. As expected, one of them had visibly wiped out from the gas cloud. Cries of pain were well-heard, even amongst the ruckus in the crowd.

Although, the rumbling hasn't stopped in that direction, leaving many of the gunmen and Logan confused.

The third man burst forth from the alleyway from across the bank. Several of Logan's men were run over in a straight line for the building. He crashed in through the glass doors, shattering their surface violently and quickly dismounted behind his vehicle. Logan cursed more as he tried to hurry inside the establishment. Many of the gangmembers were being shot up by the rider as he stood behind a cover, not even taking a scratch.

As Logan pushed his way into the bank, he drew out the shotgun he had been carrying. He was pumping shots into the two-wheeled ride, while walking closer to it. He slid around, kicked the man in the gut, and forced the helmet off his head as he stuck the barrel of the 12-gauge directly under his jaw. It was the leader of the trio, the short man with clammy skin.

Logan and the small creep stood staring at each other, in tense silence. Some of the men muttered that they heard more rumbling in the distance, but they were dismissed as likely paranoid from the current circumstances.

The pale young man chuckled in spite of his situation.

"Ahh," he sighed contentedly, "that was fun. I guess we can't all be winners in the end. How appropriate that you're the one keeping me in place here, since you know that better than anyone else. Oh dear, how the irony thickens."

"Ya think you're gonna get away from me this time?" Logan growled.

"I've been in worse positions than this, so I consider the possibility."

"Not. A. *Fuckin'*. Chance."

"Enough with the theatrics, just kill me already."

"I thought you'd never say so."

"*Stop!*" a voice shouts out.

Chapter 25:

"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage."

- Lao Tzu

The road was long, and about forty minutes has passed. Emily quickly ran out of stamina to keep running, but she forced her legs to keep walking. That's the least she had to do. She kept motivating herself in her head, but it was hard to stay strong with her muscles turning against her in the brutal heat. No matter, there was no time to have pity on herself.

They need you, she thought. They need you. They need you there with them. They're in trouble, they're waiting for you. Keep going Emily, keep going!

As she kept walking, sweating like an animal, she peered to the horizon. No buildings in sight. Regardless of whatever doubts her mind created, she had to continue forth. She did allow herself to at least be frustrated with not being able to get there faster. Nobody was around to hear whatever optimistic words she whispered to herself, and even she could barely hear them as her ears were plugged from the continuous movement she pushed on herself.

A little red flag in her head was starting to wave as she kept going. Something felt a little off. She tried looking and listening around, but couldn't immediately find out whatever was going on. She glanced back at the other side of the road, and in the distance was a black dot. When she listened carefully enough, the familiar sound of distant rumbling had returned. Emily's eyes lit up with hope, and she stood in the middle of the road to wait for the approaching rider. Though it was most likely a member of the same gang that the other three men were in, this was her best chance to get to her destination quicker.

Within around four minutes, the dot was becoming larger and more detailed, the sounds of the vehicle becoming louder and more pronounced. The rumble lowered in pitch, exactly as Emily hoped it would. Slowing to a stop in front of her, a man took off his helmet and raised his hand as a greeting.

"Hey," he said, "would ya mind getting off the road? I got somewhere to be right now."

"I need some help," said Emily. "Can you drive me over to Thomaston, the small town just ahead, please? I need to get there as fast as I can. I won't need any more favors than that."

"Hah! You're in luck, I was just on my way there. Hop on behind me."

The man stood up to give some room for the teen. It wasn't until Emily mounted the guy's ride that she noticed a peculiar-looking firearm he had strapped on his back. Placed just over the action was also

"Careful," he said, "I don't want the lenses on the scope getting dirty or anything. I gotta know, though: have you rode on a motorcycle before?"

"I haven't," she said.

"Then you'll want to wrap your arms around me, and don't move around too much. Balance is pretty important on this thing, and we don't wanna wipe out."

Emily was a little hesitant, but she complied. Whatever would be going on in this vehicle, she wouldn't be able to guess. The guy put his helmet back on, and bent his wrist onto the handle of the motorcycle, making it growl. Emily flinched in surprise, and the man giggled a little.

Once he sat back down, the ride then growled more as it suddenly started moving on its own accord. The girl yelped, though the sound of the vehicle overwhelmed her own. The wind was feeling stronger as they began speeding up, and the air a little cooler. Though she had to deal with the hard edges of the rifle pushed against her abdomen, it was barely even noticeable with the amount of relief she felt from the breeze.

The two were riding well into around the ten and fifteen minute range, and Emily looked out into the approaching horizon. The flat line seemed to have a few darker shapes coming into view. They were oddly angular, but as she squinted her eyes, she noticed that the entire area seemed familiar. The inside of her was bursting with assurance and joy, even if she couldn't express it while on the motorcycle.

Eventually, the growling of the vehicle lowered and settled as the man slowed down at about sixty yards away from the first small buildings. Emily looked around, confused at the sudden halt.

"What're you doing?" she asked.

"This is as far as I can drive in this town," the man replied. "If you need to go further, you'll have to walk the rest of the way."

"Um, alright. I guess. Thanks for the lift anyway."

"By the way, I'd suggest getting somewhere to lay low. For all I know, there's trouble around."

Emily sprinted down the street, not paying any mind to the man's warning.

"Your funeral, kid," he mumbled to himself.

He grabbed his long rifle, checking it over for any notable damage. It came out pretty clean along that length of the ride, fortunately for him. As he dismounted and turned off the motorcycle, he began loading the firearm with colorful, feathery rounds of ammunition.

Chapter 26:

"Whenever anyone has offended me, I try to raise my soul so high that the offense cannot reach it."

- Rene Descartes

"Enough gunfire."

Cassandra emerged from behind a door to a hallway inside the bank. She had a face like a strict mother, irritated with supposedly mistreating their children. Logan looked at her in acknowledgement, but didn't lose any of his expressed ferocity.

"Cass, get outta here!" he shouted. "This disgustin' creep is too dangerous to keep alive. What'd I say earlier about ya trustin' me this time?"

"I'm sorry, Logan," Cassandra said, "but I've left this in your hands quite enough for today, I'd think. Allow me to give an alternative option for the man."

Cassandra walked to the pale man, grabbing him by the cheeks to have him make eye contact. She sweetly smiled to him, and it only made him groan.

"How about this," she said, "we won't fire at you, and we'll take the time to patch up your boys. In return, you don't fire at us, and you don't come back after you leave. The people in this bank are under my watch, and they will stay protected while under my watch. Are you and I clear on that, young man?"

The man scrunched up his neck to adjust Cassandra's hold on his face. He bit her hand in retaliation while growling like a wild animal. Strangely enough, she wasn't getting hurt this time. However, from the man's shaking around, she released the hold she had on his face.

"Back off, you dirty *whore*!" he yelled.

"See, Cass?" Logan said, gritting his teeth. "This guy and his goonies will not be reasoned with. It's not worth the risk to keep them running around."

"I hate people like you," the man ranted. "I'm sick and freaking tired of mind tricks from mask-wearing deva frauds like you. There's no point getting a national leader again, the hellish cycle will just start all over again through the years. No, no. I'm not letting a manipulative, lying broad like you say whatever and automatically make it a whole rule for the Achosian public! You don't rule any of us! We will not be dictated by anything other than what truly matters, and that's *freedom*!"

The man was becoming visibly hysterical under the pressure of everyone. Despite whatever harm he wasn't able to cause now, he still had a fighting spirit. Some veins in his forehead were visibly throbbing against his clammy skin, and Cassandra had to pause a moment to restrain her own disgust.

"You truly do not understand who you're speaking to," she muttered. "Your freedom, along with everyone else's, is listed as a top-priority with me."

"Bullshit," the man said.

"Oh, if you only knew, sir. Maybe if you were more respectful and open to negotiation, I could better explain myself to you. Unfortunately, it seems you only intend to leave it at time telling you."

"I know what you're up to; I know what kind of foul tricks you're spewing out of that chirpy little mouth of yours. It's exactly that sort of talk that gets me pissed off. Keep talking like you are, and I promise you that someone in here will get bloodthirsty."

Logan pressed the shotgun barrel up into the man's temple area. His index finger was shaking with anticipation as it remained wrapped at the gun's trigger.

"All I know is," Cassandra sighed, "while I'm in charge, no one's freedoms are going to be brushed aside. As Achos currently is, no one is happy despite their unlimited freedom. Is that what you and your men really believe, that there's only true freedom when that's all there is? All it's very much done is make people suffer and fear everything around them. This is no good alternative, and everyone here knows it. I'm sorry you believe me to be a fake, but people like you, your men, as well as Logan and these church-going folks are almost the entire reason why I aim for the top to begin with. Despite the trouble you've caused us today, I care about you and people exactly like you."

The man looked towards Logan with a snicker, but was unable to meet him in the eye completely. The gunmen at the door began to either

slightly lower or raise their arms, unsure how much Cassandra's speaking was working.

"Go ahead, love," the creep chuckled, "keep gabbing on all you like. You might have me surrounded, I might be forced to listen to you; but you forget, no good deed goes unpunished."

Cassandra lowered her brows in slight confusion, while Logan's eyes darted around the area. Regardless of the puzzling statement, the young woman shook it off.

"Let's get a mechanic to fix up your ride," she said. "Once it's repaired, you will be the first to leave our town. Do we understand each oth--"

Logan flinches in an awkward way, looking in pain before going limp and falling unconscious onto the ground. The man in front of them swiped the shotgun from off of the floor, before rapidly pumping and firing to the gunmen at the door. He darted around inside the room to avoid their fire before grabbing onto a bewildered Cassandra across the shoulder, switching places with her as the hostage.

"Here we go," he smirked.

He shoved the barrel to the side of her head, and pulled the trigger for the sixth and last shot. With the shocking lack of red splattering all over the place, he looked up to the girl with shock and irritation.

"I guess you missed," said Cassandra.

The pale man snarled and dug his knee into her back, just above her waist. She winced as she was bent over forwards, her chest prominently standing forth.

A sudden, sharp sting rose up from Cassandra's lower neck. Sticking out from just above her collarbone was a needle with colorful, feathery ends. Within moments, her whole range of consciousness slipped past into darkness. As she went out cold, her black journal slipped from her person and flipped down onto the floor.

The man smirked as he grabbed Cassandra and her black journal. In spite of his small physique, he didn't have any noticeable difficulty carrying a young woman that was actually taller than him. The armed gangmembers at the door had growled and hissed with each other as they were useless to do anything about the enemy.

"Now," the man said, "if there are no other interruptions, it's time I got to what we came here for."

He backed up with the limp Cassandra towards the hallway that would lead to the targeted refugees. As he continued shuffling towards a more open space, he dragged the young woman up against a wall. He sat her up proper, making sure she wasn't in any awkward position. He

flipped through her black book, scoffing as he tossed it to the corner. He exchanged another slap across the woman's face, smiling sadistically.

"I'll deal with you once I'm all done here," he said.

The clammy creep drew out a handgun, and stroked it with his other hand.

"Alrighty now," he called out, "let's hope you all enjoy the so-called afterlife you so fervently believe in. Who wants to be the first to die!?"

A rush came in through the back doors behind him, provoking him to turn around. Before he could blink, a reddened fist flew right into his nose bridge.

Chapter 27:

"Man is a competitive creature, and the seeds of conflict are built deep into our genes. We fought each other on the savannah and only survived against great odds by organizing ourselves into groups which would have had a common purpose, giving morale and fortitude."

- Robert Winston

The man was thrown off balance from the sudden strike. The handgun slipped out of his grasp, and slid next to Cassandra. He turned back with a greatly-bloodied nose, only to be met with another fist slugging him in the right cheek bone. Following that was a foot firmly lunging at him and into his ribs. The pale man was getting tired with being a punching bag, and so he lunged directly forward at the opponent with his shoulder. He managed to get the attacker off their feet, giving him a chance to look over who was beating him up.

It was the girl he had seen back on the road to Thomaston, holding a teary-eyed expression of pure fury. Emily's skin was noticeably redder across her face, arms, and shins. She huffed angrily to the man contrasting with her.

"What's this?" he grumbled. "A bear cub trying to act tough, eh? I figured the sun would burn you into toast before I'd see you again."

Emily said nothing, only regaining her stance as she swung her right fist towards the pale man. He sidesteps her, though she uses the

momentum to swing her foot across his face. The force carried him over flat onto the wall, but he could still keep standing.

"I figured your ethereal sky daddy hated violence," he wheezed. "You just want to prove you're a big shot among your fellow lunatics, don't you?"

"They don't do anything for me," Emily snarled. "You, on the other hand..."

She lunged an elbow into the man's gut, feeling the wind getting knocked out of him. Emily had gritted her teeth in pain along with him, her skin feeling immensely irritated with each move she made.

Should've reconsidered running through those clouds, she thought.

Before she could punch the pinned man, he picked her up by her waist and threw her down onto her back against the hard tile floor. Emily yelped, but she persisted as she stared down the man with raging eyes. She kicked the man's shin, and he knelt down in pain under a reflex. She went for another kick across the guy's face, but he quickly twisted around to block it with his shoulder.

"What's this all about, really?" the man asked.

"I knew you'd be trouble for her," Emily muttered under her breath.

The pale creep glanced over at the unconscious Cassandra, and smugly grinned as the dots started to connect.

"How cute," he said, "are you angry that I ended up coming out on top of your girlfriend? She really got on my nerves, and she barely put up a fight. It felt good to slap her the first time she spoke.

Emily growled, twisting around and swinging her fist back towards the man. He managed to react fast enough to grab her fist, following up with a knee into her gut. As she crouched over in pain, the pale man put his foot onto her back like a stool.

"I don't see how you could be so worked up," he said. "She's chasing an idealistic world, a fantasy where everyone in Achos will have a chance to be brought back to the good times, back to the way it was. Don't you see the problem with that, kid?"

Emily rolled out from under the hold of his foot, lunging for him in an uppercut. It managed to brush past the tip of his nose, though it still hurt as a result from her first blow. He reached out and grabbed her arms from behind, pressing his foot back against the lower curve in her spine to force her into another hold.

"Once everything goes back to normal," he continues, "the process will just start all over again. Politician after politician, leader after leader, the cycle of corruption will just overtake them again and turn our world into worse shit than this. What makes you believe that the brown-haired broad there could prevent any of that?"

Emily looked to Cassandra at the other wall beside her, wincing with pain as she was held by her stretched arms.

"Yeah," said the man, "doesn't seem all that much like reality, does it? It would all just defeat itself eventually. After all, Achos isn't completely without restraint as it is. Gangs have leaders, and people still look to each other a lot of times to survive out here. A new, single leader is just a pipe dream now. Power is addicting, and people don't like giving it up when they have it. The political lineage will loop back over time, and history repeats itself. So let it go, little ladybug."

Emily's face contorted with contempt for the nickname, and she persisted to try and struggle out of her position. She quickly relaxed her upper body as she then jabbed the man's knee with a backwards kick. Sure enough the man had let her go in the reflex, but as she turned around, he landed his fist directly under her nose. Emily fell over onto the ground, her gums bleeding from inside her mouth.

"You pathetic, fucking runt," the man muttered.

He kneeled down in front of Emily, grabbing and holding her wrists down. He made sure his legs were between the teen's, and now she was effectively restrained without much to break her free. All she could do was struggle under the man's grasp as he smiled at her with his ugly teeth.

"I guess you're just eager to die, then," he said. "Very well, then."

The man reached behind in his pocket, while laying his elbow across Emily's collarbone. He swiftly pulled out a butterfly knife, flipping it around until the sharp blade exposed itself across the girl's throat. The creepy man licked his lips.

"I admire your fighting spirit, kid," he whispered. "You're even pretty cute for your age. Too bad it's all downhill from here. You're a free meal for the jackals now."

From the wall beside them, eyes began to flitter open from the darkness of unconsciousness. Cassandra made light gasps of air as she began to come to. She needed a moment to evaluate her surroundings, before being fully alerted with seeing the pale man from earlier.

Emily gave one last struggle to try and escape the threat of the knife. In her thrashing, she headbutted the weapon out of the man's hand. Sick with putting up with the girl's drive to fight, he punched her across the face, followed with another. The intervals of time she had to retaliate became shorter as the man on top of her continuously beat her over and over. Her nose started to bleed, and one of her lower teeth was almost completely struck out of her gums.

The man wrapped his fingers to each side of Emily's face, and three times slammed the back of her head against the hard floor. In that moment, Emily ceased all movement and was quickly knocked out.

Cassandra watched in horror for her friend, tears rolling down her cheeks. Her hand brushed against an object beside her, and she instinctively grabbed it. She looked down to notice it was a handgun, and she immediately threw it up and pointed it directly to the man's side. He quickly swiped the balisong off the ground beside him, and in one movement, he prepared to lunge it into Emily's heart.

The sound of a gunshot pierced through the air within the bank.

Chapter 28:

"Next to hurting my family, cheating on me is the worst thing someone could do."

- Robert Buckley

A bullet had entered through the pale man's muscles beside his waist, and he cried out in great pain. He glared back to see a revived Cassandra, growling at her. The young woman was feeling none too altruistic either, her face reddened with building anger. After firing the shot, she threw the gun into a window, where it flew away as the glass shattered.

The short man stood up with a slight limp as he held onto his wound. With a roar, he dashed towards Cassandra, shooting his other fist towards her. The girl stood stoically, waiting for the impact. As the man's knuckles made contact with her skin, the sound of loud cracking filled the inside of his hand.

Cries of sheer pain echoed through the building as the man's hand was disfigured and broken. Cassandra firmly stepped over to a corner of the room, picking up her black journal from the floor. She stared back towards her enemy, while flipping through the pages of her book.

After peeking through her writings, Cassandra shuts the book and puts it away. She approaches the pained man, and forced him to meet her dark gaze. The man was still furious with her, but he began to shiver with an impending sense of dread.

"Back off," Cassandra commanded.

With a brief pull and a push on his collar, Cassandra threw the man across herself. The man was sent flying so hard out of the back doors that they came off their hinges. He rolled across the dry, hot dirt for well over 20 more feet. As his flailing body had finally come to a stop, he coughed and struggled to even roll over onto his back.

Cassandra quickly and sternly walked the distance that her toss had covered. As she approached the greatly injured man, she pushed him with her foot onto his back. She grimly stared at him, drained of most of her remorse. The creep couldn't feel anything more than his pain and the complete terror for the woman in front of him now.

"I'm willing to protect anyone through diplomatic means," Cassandra said, "and negotiate to bring everyone the peace and rights they deserve. You can hurt me all you want, and I won't stop you. However, there's something you should take heed of."

The young woman put her foot over one of the man's thighs, pushing against it with great assertion.

"I don't like people who don't know what true peace means," she continued. "In fact, it's not even just that, no. It's that you actively try to hurt any people whose ideals you do not agree with, all *in the name of peace*. But even that's not going to the furthest tip, no no. It's when people like you..."

Cassandra continued pressing her foot further into the man's thigh. He groans with more pain as a spot in his knee cracks like how one would crack their knuckles.

"... End up hurting the ones that matter the most to the cause of peace," she resumed, "that I find reason to consider you my enemy. The girl you punched out cold is *vital* to this vision, because she's a vital part of *me*. So the next time you think you can beat her and push her down to the ground..."

Her foot presses deeper yet, overwhelming pain coming over the small man.

"... You can be sure I'll beat and push you down to Hell."

With one last push of her foot, the loud crack of a broken femur faintly echoed in the space around them. The pain of the fractured bone caused the man to gasp for breath before quickly going unconscious.

From around the building, Logan's gunmen gathered around to evaluate the situation. Cassandra turned around, all of her energy and emotion depleted from all the action. She walked back inside the bank, the group of church folks peeking from their hiding places. The girl approached Emily, still knocked out, before exhaling and falling over next to her friend. Her eyes closed and a tear fell down her cheek as the

corner of her mouth twitched into a smirk. All was said and done until the following evening.

Chapter 29:

"It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership."

- Nelson Mandela

The straggling Phantom Mamba member with the large rifle had picked up the pale man while everyone had their backs turned. The sound of faint rumbling had sounded off within minutes of the conflict's resolution. All of Logan's gunmen had kept quiet, to make sure that the threat was really leaving. As the riders departed down the long stretch of road, the three scouts left their positions to join the aiding of those who were injured.

Logan was still under the effect of the sedative shot, but there were surprisingly no injuries to be found anywhere.

Cassandra and Emily were both carried to outside the front of the bank. Once the teen girl's injuries and beatings were noticed, they brought her to an emptied laundromat for more extensive care. They couldn't risk leaving her exposed to the elements in her condition. The girl's face and torso were greatly bruised, as well as a black eye. The tooth that was punched loose eventually fell out, making her mouth bleed that much more.

Despite the damages and loss, there were still those who were thankful and celebrating the victory. The church group gathered together to pray for the two girls' health, and thanking their God for watching over and protecting them.

As the sun had set, Cassandra was brought back to Sheila's Cafe, and laid down in a booth while some of Logan's men kept an eye on her. Cole had been caught up in treating some of the injured gunmen, but was now given the chance to pay a visit to her. Daniel tagged along, prepared to express gratitude on behalf of the religious folks. Even Fahima went

along to check in on the young woman, though it was less out of concern and more for her association with her superiors.

A collection of candles were lit around the interior, making the place out to seem quite romantic. Eventually, Cassandra's eyes slowly opened, grumbling as the bright center of a candle irritated her.

"Welcome back to reality," Cole said.

"Glad to see you awake," Fahima said formally.

Cassandra squinted a little, less from the bright light and more in confusion.

"Wha' happened?" she slurred.

"A miracle, that's what!" Daniel cheered.

Cassandra wiped her eyes, sitting up straighter in her seat. She looked at the middle-aged man with an unchanged, sleepy confusion.

"Oh, how many words there are to say," the man continued, "and yet where do I even start? I couldn't count how many times we have all said 'thank you' for the service you've given us today."

The memories started to kick in as Cassandra listened to the man's praise. Being slapped in the face by a pale creep, tossing him out of the bank like a ragdoll, him beating up Emily as she woke from the sedative.

"Where is Emily?" Cassandra gasped.

"Don't worry," Cole muttered, "she's doing alright. She's in a different place down the street for better care. The girl got pretty messed up back there."

"We'll stick around to see her better, too," Daniel stated. "God does marvelous things, he does. I mean, just look at what he was able to bless *you* with, Cassandra!"

Cassandra lowered her brows, puzzled once again.

"I'll just go now, to see to Logan," Fahima whispered to Cole.

"Right behind you," Cole replied.

The two departed out of the front doors, leaving a couple of their men to overhear the conversation unfolding.

"I mean, honestly," said Daniel, "if we didn't know better, we might just make you out to be a messiah! Such great power to vanquish great evils, God is surely smiling on you to carry out his deeds like so."

Cassandra stood up out of the booth, crossing her arms as she listened intently.

"When I heard that you wanted to lead Achos into prosperity again, I admit, I was filled with doubts. I was so sure that you were another fool doomed to have reality crashing down on top of themselves. But now, I am surely convinced, you are more than just another fool, another person with a pipe dream! On behalf of my friends and family, we would be honored to have you in charge, bringing God back into a good--"

"Let me stop you right there," Cassandra interrupted. "My goals and your God's goals are not the same. Divinity has nothing to do with me."

"What're you saying?" Daniel asked. "Of course God has something to do with you, he has something to do with all of us!"

"As far as you know. I think if God had any sort of plan for Achos himself, someone like me wouldn't even exist. Or let me rephrase, someone with *my abilities* would not exist. The reason for that is exactly for times like this. I am grateful that you now have faith in me, but if I were anyone's messiah, I wouldn't be yours."

"Well, like I precisely said, we know better than to see you as a messiah."

"And yet you're so quick to believe that God is solely responsible for what I've done today? I can do great deeds with my powers, but I can also do great evil. Also, I don't appreciate you implying that anyone that opposes me is evil. The man I had to get physical with may be violently misguided, but they were just as much another human being as anyone here, and I loathe the thought of using my talents to beat anyone up. But I still did it. It might not have been right, but it was done by my own judgement. Not your God's."

Daniel bowed his head in thought, while forcing back any expressions or gestures of disappointment.

"I might be willing to protect those who believe in God," Cassandra sighed, "but I will not be put on a pedestal that I don't strive for myself. God's goals and my goals will remain separate, thank you very much."

The older man hesitantly nodded.

"Well," he said, "regardless of what you say or believe, we owe you much for giving us sanctuary. Whatever you do now, we will support it as best we can."

Cassandra gave Daniel a reassuring smile before he departed from the diner. She sat back down in the booth next to her, pulling out her black journal and browsing through the pages quietly.

"Ain't some of those people celebrating or something?" one of the gunmen whispered.

"Yeah, lucky them, huh?" the other replied.

"Too bad alcohol's getting pretty scarce out here. I'd kill for a beer."

"You know," Cassandra butted in, "it's not much, but I think I have something that could help."

"Uh, ma'am?" they both ask.

"Why don't you get some of the boys up here, we'll have a celebration if you all want one so badly."

Chapter 30:

"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

- Leo Buscaglia

Within the hour, Logan had come to. Many familiar faces surrounded him as he was laid against the wall. As his vision cleared up, and his mind vaguely refreshed, he uttered a curse to himself. Though many of his men were safe, he knew for certain that not all of them were present, let alone spared. The young man came out practically unscathed, though the dust and dirt all over his body would make him almost appear as if he really was roughed up. He quickly stood up, brushed himself off, and stared around the entire building.

"Where's the creep that tried to kill us?" he asked.

"He escaped, sir," the scout Anisah responded, "though um, just barely. Cassandra and her friend have managed to give him a reason not to come back. Mostly the former."

Logan looked at the man quizzically.

"Y'mean," he mumbled, "like, *beating him up*? Not any diplomat-ey, peaceful negotiation like she usually does?"

"Including throwing him several feet out of the back doors and breaking his femur, yes."

Logan put his palm across his face in shock and awe. It was too bad he had to miss out on that spectacle. He also wondered what it took to bring the young woman to resort to such violence. Back in Norris Rock, she never even lifted a finger at him.

At that moment, he was reminded of another piece of the puzzle.

"Do we know where Emily is?" asked Logan.

"Yes sir," Anisah said, "she is receiving more extensive care in the abandoned laundromat down the street."

"How well is she now?"

"She'll pull through, but she looks pretty bad. You'd never tell that she was doing fine just by looking at her, though."

Eventually, approaching the scene was Cole and Fahima, relieved that their leading man had recovered. Logan dismissed Anisah, and waved for Cole to come over. The large man stepped over and crossed his arms with a slight grin on his face. Logan put a hand on his shoulder, sighing as he tried to absorb all he's been told.

"Man, what do I ask first?" he said.

"Asking about Cassandra or the church folks would be a start," said Cole.

"Uh, okay. Shoot."

"Cassandra's fine, but she's pretty tired right now. None of the people that came in today have been killed, so I'd say it's a mission success."

"Geez. How much o' them are prayin' to God about their victory?"

"I wasn't there for that conversation."

Logan pulled out a cigarette from the pack in his pocket, along with a lighter. As he puffed, he could already feel himself start to simmer down. He looked up towards Cole, a smirk working its way onto his face.

"Y'know," he said, "I guess this means I owe a thank you to ya."

"For what?" Cole asked.

"I still underestimated Cassandra, and ya knew I was. Now I see that I gotta start trustin' her more."

"Sounds like a thank you and an apology is in order, in that case."

" 'Ey, don't get greedy on me, big guy."

"No no no, it's not me you need to say them to."

The two men chuckled as they observed some of their men heading into Sheila's Cafe, for whatever reason. Logan patted Cole's shoulder, and took another puff.

"They might be celebrating," said the dark man. "You up for some partying?"

"Eh," Logan sighed, "not just yet. Before I get all sappy on Cassie, there's someone I gotta pay a visit to. You head up w'thout me, I'll catch up."

Before Cole walked off completely, he briefly muttered something to the two scouts. As he continued on his way, neither of them decided to tag along, instead going elsewhere. Logan eyeballed around the street as he took another puff. Fairly satisfied, he tossed down the cigarette and stomped on it.

The streets began to grow quiet as the evening crept closer, all the men either preparing for a small celebration or readjusting to their regular nightwatch shifts. The moon was a little past its first quarter phase, glowing well into the sky as the sun had totally disappeared.

Logan casually walked out to the other side of the street, careful not to strain himself if there were any sore spots he didn't know about. He never had any reason to trust his own body if he was brought back from a period of unconsciousness. His tennis shoes skidded and clapped against the concrete, and he halted as he peeked through one of the building's windows. A candle had been lit inside, though there was just enough reflection in the window to prevent any kind of clarity for what was inside. He pushed the building's door open, a hiss of wind rushing inside.

Inside was mostly what could be expected, a bunch of washing machines and dryers. Only thing was, they were all pushed towards the walls to make for more room in the interior. Lying on top of three machines was Emily, a candle lit just a little ahead of her.

To Logan's surprise, no one else was around. He wasn't sure whether to just assume it was resting time, or if whoever was taking care of the girl was starting to slack. He approached the teen, still out cold. Taking the candle, he waved it around over her to see her condition more clearly.

Emily's beaten face looked even worse with the candle's lighting. Her usual clothes were removed for the sake of her care, though her chest and abdomen looked nearly just as bad. Logan sighed, before setting the candle back down and patting her hand.

"Good fightin', kid," he whispered. "Real good. Glad to have ya back."

The girl's fingers started to weakly wrap themselves around the young man's hand. Within a few moments, her eyes blinked open and she quietly mapped out where she was. Logan had flinched once she began to wake.

Emily turned her head, looking at her hand, and then at who it belonged to. Her face remained blank, simply blinking as Logan was kept in an awkward position.

"Hey Em," he stifled, "glad to, uh, see your gears kickin' in again."

"Where am I?" Emily whispered.

"Just a laundromat, but um, you're back in Thomaston."

"Where's Cassandra?"

"Back at the diner, but we'll wait to see 'er tomorrow. You're lookin' pretty terrible right now, can't have ya leavin' just yet."

In that instance, Emily winced as a wave of pain came over her. Logan was prepared to lift her upwards, but she waved a hand in dismissal.

"It probably looks worse than it feels," she said.

The girl slowly swung her feet off the surface of the machines, a little surprised to find there were no shoes or socks on her feet. Her eyes browsed up and down her arms and body, observing all the superficial damage. At least the one eye that was blackened and swollen wasn't her dominant eye. Emily then looked back up to Logan, who simply curled his lips and gave a light shrug.

"Shocking that you didn't get hurt," she said. "I figured you'd be the first they'd want to kill off."

"How d'you mean?" Logan asked, lowering his brow.

"Well, if you were in charge of defending everyone, it would make sense that they'd aim to take you out first."

"Oh. Right, yeah."

"How is Cassandra?"

"She's fine. She got a li'l exhausted from the fracas, but that's all."

"Good, good."

Emily looked out the window, into the growing darkness of the night. She ran her fingers through her hair, sighing with a sense of melancholy.

"So where did'cha run off to?" Logan asked. "Cass's been pretty worried about'cha since this mornin'."

"I, um," Emily said hesitantly, "we, er..."

"C'mon, make words for me."

"We kind of, uh, got into a fight."

Logan raised his head in understanding, then took a seat on one of the washing machines next to Emily. He took out a cigarette, but after a second thought, he put it away; he felt that smoking in this place at this time would be inappropriate.

"Care to tell me 'bout it while I'm still here?" he asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Emily trailed off.

"Hey. After today, I don't think there's much that could be said to make today worse than it's already gotten. So shoot."

The teenage girl made a slight groan, but understood enough to comply.

"Basically, I told her how I thought it was a bad idea to take you in."

Logan's lips twisted upward before burst out laughing, with a little snort included. Now he was glad he hadn't ended up lighting a cigarette, otherwise he wouldn't laugh quite as hard.

"All that tells me," he chuckled, "is that you ain't a dumb girl. I wouldn't trust me, either."

"Why not?" Emily inquired. "If you can't trust yourself, who could you trust out there?"

"Listen, Em. I've had the span o' twenny-somethin' years to figure out who I am. I'll come clean: I'm a pretty mean man-bitch. You'd might as well say I've gotta few loose screws, and a lot o' my men will definitely tell ya that much. But guess what? Growin' up, I had almost no support. Big shock, right?"

"My parents, friends, and even a few boyfriends here an' there were freaked out when I told 'em all out front that I was a guy, and I wanted to join a gang. Keep in mind, I was romanticizin' that lifestyle back then. Anyway, at that point, I pretty much lost everybody. It was at that moment o' my life, that very freakin' second, I wasn't at home. I wasn't with my real family, even if I did come outta the woman that raised me. Over the years, I met Cole, a lot o' my men, the three scouts, feelin' more at home with them than I've ever felt since.

"When I was with 'em, I learned more 'bout my short temper, my goals, my sense o' morality, all that fun self-reflection stuff. When I looked at myself, I was pretty content with who I was, even if I wouldn't trust another guy like me. All I needed was other folks I knew I could trust to be content with *me*. That's all that matters, whoever likes ya as you are."

Emily sat with polite interest for the young man's colorful speech, though in her mind were still the same sort of doubting thoughts.

"So," she muttered, "why do you sound so okay with me, right now?"

"Let's call it optimism," Logan snickered. "I know you've still gotta ways to grow yet. Not only that, but Cassandra's part o' my life now, along with the rest of my crew. Since me an' her are pretty much out seekin' the same goal, it only makes sense to watch out for my own. And I dunno if you've noticed, but uh, you're kinda special to 'er, y'know? I've had some time to prepare for a moment like this, since you kinda stand out compared to Cass."

"So you're only tolerating me out of obligation to my best friend?"

"Ehh, I wouldn't put it that way. More like, um, I dunno, a new step-sibling that ya tend to bicker with, but have a few times to warm each other's hearts. Granted, that's just me, I dunno how our dynamic is workin' inside your noggin."

Emily leaned forward, crossing her arms over her knees in deeper thought. Right now, she feels a little too brain-dead from the beatings she received earlier today.

"You could also look at it from this angle," Logan continued, "there's that one law o' nature, somethin' about actions making positive an' negative reactions? Anyway, if it would help my case, I could tell ya that the positive result in havin' me along for the ride is all the protection and support that'chu an' Cassandra have now. Even if you kinda earned it the hard way, heh."

"I know that already," Emily said, "but what I was mostly worried about was you eventually betraying us when we were most vulnerable."

"Well, there's only one answer I got for that: I ain't my old family. I might have several kinds o' flaws, but dishonesty ain't anywhere in the mix. I can't stand people who could do that."

"Me, neither."

The two shared a glance at each other, Logan smirking in approval. As he turned his gaze to the floor, he made an expression akin to having an epiphany.

"Y'know," he said, "I just realized: speakin' of positive and negative results, I actually told Cassandra that I didn't want any o' those church people taken into refuge in this town."

"I can only guess she was really trusting," Emily mumbled.

"That's exactly what I thought, too. Those three guys that attacked us were after the folks we were giving protection to, so I thought they should'a hit the road. Cassandra wouldn't have it, and I knew the negative of that was getting attacked. However, the positive..."

"Hm? What?"

"... The positive end was that they were the reason you came back. Ain't it?"

Emily stared into space for a moment, then shrugged.

"More or less, I suppose."

"Heh," Logan chuckled, "what a fun-filled co-inky-dink."

Logan kicked his feet back onto the floor, and stared out the window. He patted Emily on the knee, trying to work up more words to say.

"Over by the diner," he said, "it looks like most o' the boys are gatherin' around for a small victory party."

"Are you going?" Emily asked.

"Yep. I just wanted to check in on ya for a bit before I headed over there with 'em. Might be a good idea if ya got some more rest."

"Are you kidding? I want to come, too."

"Ya sure? Walkin' that distance doesn't seem to be in your capabilities yet."

"What did I just get done saying about me looking worse than I feel?"

"Tsk. 'Kay then, I wanna have ya walk over to the door. Just gotta be sure."

Emily slid off the machine, and her legs shook violently before she got a hold of her balance. She took a few baby steps, and then stood normally.

"See?" she said. "I got this."

Upon shifting her weight with a single regular step, a sore spot on her knee reacted to the pressure. Her leg began to buckle in the sudden pain, and she was forced into kneeling.

Logan scoffed, before reaching down and helping her back up.

"I'll reward ya for the effort," he snickered. "Here, hop on."

He crouched down, signaling to carry Emily on his back. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, legs in the spaces between his arms. He grunted as he lifted, but managed to keep balance surprisingly well.

"You're lighter than I thought," said Logan.

"I haven't been as well-fed lately," Emily mumbled.

"You're only just so lucky I'm still able-bodied."

"Oh, hush up and get moving."

The two departed the building and began the walk to the diner. The windows were lit with an unexpected yet considerable amount of light, though not enough to indicate the generator was turned on. It was likely all candles that were brought in by those who came by. Logan's legs already started to tire a little, but mostly because the diner sat on what's probably the only hill for several miles.

Emily's previous doubts still lingered, only they felt more distant. Enough so, she felt more satisfied with herself and others than she has in a while.

Chapter 31:

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

The inside of Sheila's Cafe was significantly more lively than people were initially expecting. From outside, the muffled sound of young men chanting through their favorite songs emanated from within. It was strange for Logan to hear; he was used to his boys whispering to each other, and maybe laughing together at most.

As the two came inside, there was a noticeably large amount of alcohol around. Last time it was checked, the diner was pretty much dried up of liquor and beer. Emily looked around quizzically at everyone around her, lost as to how such a spectacle was taking place.

Cassandra was seen sitting on top of the bar counter, a bottle containing a milky yellow beverage. As opposed to some of the gangmembers, she still seemed pretty sober.

"Hey, babe!" one of the men shouted, "how're you not drunk yet, that's like your third bottle o' that stuff!"

"This is my first bottle, though," Cassandra replied.

"But baby, what were ya drinkin' before?"

"Sir, I'm not your girlfriend. She's over *there*."

"Oh. Where is she now?"

"In that booth. She's the one without her bra on."

"Okay, thanks babe."

Cassandra rolled her eyes, chuckling with the drunken man's absurdity. She turned to see Logan and Emily, and she made an expression both of glee and of concern.

"Emily!" she gasped.

"What's up, *mi mejora amiga*?" Emily said with a weak wave.

"Oh, if only you woke up a little sooner or later, we could have a better chance to talk."

"Don't worry about me. I don't like repeating myself, but I look worse than I feel."

"Oh, good. Hang on just a moment. Will somebody make a booth space for Emily!?"

At her exclamation, a few men kindly scooted out of their seats, allowing for the teen to sit with her legs out. Logan pushed down behind their abdomen, stretching out his back from carrying the girl. He briefly mentioned catching up with Cassandra later, before wandering off to a different part of the diner.

Cassandra pulled out another bottle that looked like her own, and slid it over to Emily.

"What's this?" the teen asked.

"It's hard lemonade. I hear alcohol will help you loosen up. Just don't drink too much at once, or else it'll affect your head."

Emily inspected the bottle silently, before unscrewing the cap and taking a sip. She shivered with the sour taste sneaking up on her, but she was fairly impressed how refreshing it was. However, she considered her condition along with Cassandra's warning, and only drank in sips.

"Cassie!" another man shouted. "Some of the guys here have some fun ideas we need you for!"

"Uh, hmm?" she responded.

One of them walked up to her, his hands out in an exaggerated gesture.

"Okay," he said, "y'know how you tossed that one creepy-looking dude from out of the bank? We wanna test how much more you can do. Just poke me right here in the chest, I wanna see what happens."

"Well," she murmured, "I can't exactly use my powers for just anything, you know. If I go too far, I might end up really hurting someone. Maybe even worse."

"Then just tone yourself down so that we'll be safe. You can do that, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"C'mon, we're seeking some thrills. Just for tonight."

Cassandra took a swig of her bottle, and gave a submissive smile.

"I suppose a few exercises wouldn't hurt," she said.

The guys all clapped and cheered, and the one in front of her unbuttoned his jacket just enough to show a bare chest. Cassandra placed her index finger squarely in the center of his pecs, and gently nudged inward.

The young man was pushed into sliding right back to the booth he came from. Everyone was captivated with the sight, applauding Cassandra before she took another sip of her hard lemonade. Even Emily was rather amused with watching her friend pull these tricks.

"Does someone have anything flammable?" Cassandra asked.

Most everyone was ooh-ing in response, and someone on the other side of the diner handed her a napkin from their table.

"This is something I've actually wanted to see if I could do for a while," she said.

With a single pinch and twist of her fingers, the napkin was lit on fire. As the cloth was incinerated into nothing, the people around the diner were further impressed with the sight. Emily flinched in surprise, never having seen her friend do something like that before. She quickly

figured out how though, just warping the conflict between the friction in her fingers.

"I think I might need to step outside for this next one," said Cassandra.

She chugged down the rest of her lemonade, and walked out the doors. From the window, she could be seen raising her hand to the air. She quickly snapped her fingers, and the cracking sound was loud enough to be equivalent to a gunshot.

Conflict between the sound's vibrations and air particles, Emily thought. *Gets 'em every time.*

As Cassandra stepped back inside the diner, she quickly pointed to a random stranger.

"Quick," she said, "tell me what your name is, Paul."

"My name's Paul," the man said unconsciously.

"*Wrong!* Tell him what it really is, Logan."

"Your name's Troy, ya dumbass!" Logan shouted jokingly.

The gathering of people had a laugh amongst each other with the young woman's mind trick. Though Emily watched with a visible amount of discomfort. If Cassandra was any other girl, it wouldn't be so bad, but considering how well she knows her friend, Emily found it rather disturbing how easy it was for Cassandra to pull off that stunt.

Come to think of it, it seemed weird that she would consider doing anything affecting other people's minds at all. The teen was only put off more with the thought of a different side of Cassandra being brought to the front.

"Whew, okay," Cassandra said, "I think I only got the energy for one more trick tonight. Anyone have any suggestions?"

One of the men came up and tapped the young woman's shoulder.

"Light my hair on fire," he requested, "but make it so not a single strand is actually burned."

Everyone around the two started ooh-ing again, Emily a little uncertain about the request. Part of her hoped that Cassandra would have enough sense not to take it.

"Upping the ante, huh?" the young woman replied. "Okay, let's have at it."

Worst best friend ever, Emily thought.

The man grabbed his curly blonde hair, stretching it out to help Cassandra gain a hold of it. She clapped her palms over the clump, and rubbed them against each other to cause the strands of hair to catch on fire.

Within moments, the man's entire scalp was covered in flames, though he never made a single flinch or scream in pain.

"Feel any burning?" Cassandra asked.

"Nah, not a thing," the man giggled. "It's kinda hot though, time to put it out."

Cassandra put her hands around the man's fiery head, and blew out a deep breath. In that one moment, the flames were extinguished. The man's head of hair was completely unharmed, though there was a slight change in color.

Everyone applauded Cassandra as she sat back onto the bar counter. She blushed, bowing her head repeatedly with a verbal thank-you attached to each time she did so. After the little show was over, Emily withdrew herself to staring out the window. She hadn't stayed for the party that long at all, and yet she was already set to retire for the night.

As she stared outside, her peripheral vision caught a little bit of movement.

She couldn't pick it out again, as the whole place was already too dark to see all that clearly. Even under the moonlight, she couldn't pick out the source of the movement again. She shrugged it off as an eye floater.

All the people resumed chattering and cheering amongst themselves, slamming down more of their alcohol. When asked, they claimed every bottle and drink was all brought individually. It would've never been guessed from the higher-ranks that they managed to stockpile without their knowledge. None of them really got in any trouble for it, though.

"Hey boys," Cole stood up from the gathering, "I have something important to say."

Everyone silenced as they looked over to the large man.

"I think it's worth making a toast now, for everything that's happened today. To us, and to Cassandra."

A cheer was spread around as everyone praised each other and Cassandra. The latter continued blushing in her seat, but still tried her best to remain at least somewhat dignified. Emily decided to comply, raising her own bottle to honor her friend.

As the drinks began sounding off several *clinks*, an enormously loud banging sound from outside the building overwhelmed everyone's bottles.

Logan rushed outside to check the disturbance. A cloud of dust trailed behind a black shape in the distance, and at the young man's feet

was a folded piece of paper. He scanned both sides of the diner building, looking for anyone hiding out in the corners. Cautiously, he picked up the paper and proceeded back inside.

The gangmembers were hushed into a silent suspicion, looking to their leader to tell them of the sudden outburst. Logan sat down on one of the stools lined up to the bar counter, and unfolded the paper. A message was written inside, in oddly fancy, stylized handwriting:

Dear Thomaston residents,

I've just been reported back to from one of my best men, and the sight of his beaten person has considerably shattered my spirits. We noticed his broken femur, and as I'm sure you know already, it is unfortunately impossible to give him proper treatment. So, I'm writing to you to say: I'm well-prepared to get even with you.

I declare that we are to engage in a battle, appropriately a gang war. If you win, you will gain our territory in the nation's former capital city. If you lose, well... you all die. Personally, I am most impressed in the fact that you are spirited enough to challenge us, but I am most furious with the nature that you did so.

Also, you'd better find a way to get here quick. I have a city to care for, I have no time to head your way.

Well, at least not by the truckloads. If you don't stop by soon, we'll find ways to wittle you down. Like so:

- One week: three of your men will be wounded.***
- Two weeks: three of your men will be killed.***
- Three weeks: all superiors (with exception of the leader) will be taken hostage. Don't worry, we'll find a way.***
- Four weeks: all of your allies will be killed.***
- Five weeks: you will be killed.***

And to prevent confusion, yes, we mean you, Cassandra Streit. You'd better hurry. Time has always been your biggest enemy.

Leader of the Phantom Mambas

Chapter 32:

"Tolerance implies no lack of commitment to one's own beliefs. Rather it condemns the oppression or persecution of others."

- John F. Kennedy

From the distressing message that was dropped off, the partying was immediately over. The alcohol was put away, all the men left the

diner, and the top-ranking people had to wait in making a game plan until morning, when their minds would be refreshed.

Logan had been cursing quietly to themselves until they fell asleep, Cole stayed up to take nightwatch, and the two girls had decided to rest in the same booth, though it was mostly for the sake of Cassandra watching over the injured Emily.